

Foreword



This report summarizes the 2015-2016 academic year, which also marks forty years since the university opened its doors to students. What better opportunity to look back in pride and satisfaction on four decades of extensive academic endeavor that have established the OUI as an Israeli educational institution of the highest order. We celebrated our anniversary with special publications and a series of lectures offered to the general public. Towards the end of the year, we held a highly informative exhibition by The Open University Publishing House, including a display of textbooks and study guides published for forty years by the university. The exhibition created by the Publishing House staff under the direction of Yona Leshed-Rubinstein, provided a timely overview of the study books that have become a valuable asset to teaching throughout the entire Israeli higher education system.

The past year, however, was not dominated by retrospection. Our glance towards the past shifted to the present and focused on addressing immediate budget challenges and long-term planning for the future, which also occupied us during the previous year. As I pointed out in the last President's Report, it is our intention to streamline our work to ensure the long-term financial stability of the university, with the capacity to adapt to a rapidly-changing demographic, technological, and academic environment.

With a view to addressing short-term budget challenges, specific cost-cutting measures were already introduced in the previous year, producing a significant reduction in the anticipated deficit for 2015-2016. However, long-term budget stabilization will detract from our ability to realize

the multi-year plan that we strove towards during the past year.

Our multi-year plan was based on the following goals:

- Making the OUI the preferred choice of new and existing students, while maintaining the academic level and enhancing the students' study experience.
- Increasing the number of graduates.
- Adapting the teaching structure to changing instructional needs.
- Reinforcing the OUI's status as leader in implementing advanced online learning technologies.
- Ensuring the OUI's position as a recognized research university.
- Improving and streamlining work processes.

Over the past few months, eleven teams that were formed last year to define strategies for achieving the multi-year plan have completed their assignments. The groups consisted of eighty OUI academic and administrative faculty members, as well as representatives of the student union (some serving on more than one team) and various other members of the OUI community who responded to the call for proposals issued by the teams, and became involved in the work at hand. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to Avinoam Lazarov, who coordinated this mammoth undertaking, and to all the team leaders and members, and all others who contributed to this mission.

Three topics are already being addressed and deserve special mention:

1) A team working on student guidance and support services, which we consider to be of vital importance, encompassing all facets of the university's life, is headed by Prof. Haim Saadon, Dean of Academic Studies. We are already addressing this issue, and are hoping to produce significant improvement in student retention and graduation figures in the years ahead.

2) The ongoing issue of teaching structure is being addressed by a team which will examine how best to implement the recommendations of the committee that concluded work on the issue last year. This group is also headed by the dean of academic studies and works in cooperation with all academic departments.

3) The third important issue, as we look to the next decade and beyond, focuses on the enhancement and streamlining of work processes, especially the interface between academic departments, the office of the Dean of Academic Studies, and the Teaching Services Administration. In recent months, individual work began on some aspects of this issue, under the direction of Yossi Ma'aori, the OUI's deputy director of human resources.

The main body of the report presents a detailed picture of the Open University in 2015-2016, I will therefore concentrate here on a few components only. During the past year, 42,266 students studied towards BA degrees, 3,114 were enrolled in MA programs, and 147 in certificate-studies programs. These figures represent a continued downswing in enrollment, as has been experienced in other universities as well. This is partly due to the reduced size of the relevant cohorts, and partly due to growing competition for students among Israel's institutions of higher education, which in turn is affected by the same demographic downturn. We have decided to confront this problem in a variety of ways, including formulating a program to increase student retention; introducing measures to raise the level of interest in OUI study among new population groups (such as the ultra-Orthodox, for instance); structured programs for BA studies; designated specialist tracks (such as an Internet domain security track for BA students in computer science); and programs combining BA studies with vocational certification studies, launched during the past year. A new program for the advancement of Ethiopian-Israeli students was also introduced, which helped to successfully integrate eighty students into the overall student body.

Another development in the past year was the introduction of a BA program in chemistry, which was approved by the Council for Higher Education (CHE), as well as 12 new study programs in natural sciences, public law, education, and computer science. This year, the CHE has approved our graduate program in History. It is the first OUI Masters program in the humanities to be approved, and will be introduced in 2017-2018. Also new in the past year was a transfer track for a law degree, in cooperation with Bar-Ilan University.

In the realm of online teaching, the OUI incorporated new technologies, as well as producing two flagship courses, Introduction to Mass Media, and Selected Works

of Western Literature, after winning a call for proposals issued by the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) of the CHE. This year, Academia Online, a subsidiary of the OUI, launched free online academic English courses, responding to a request by the CHE and the PBC, which funded it. The English Department and Shoham (The Center for Technology in Distance Education) invested much effort in the preparation of these courses and the result is a most impressive product. These and other projects aimed at developing Academia Online learning resources represent only the first steps by the subsidiary in this competitive arena and we look forward to seeing many more products in the future.

In the research arena, OUI faculty members were awarded eight research grants and two grants supporting book publication by the Israel Science Foundation, as well as one grant from GIF (the German-Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development). The jewel in the crown was the university's first ever European Research Council (ERC) research grant, which was awarded to Dr. Reut Tzarfati of the mathematics and computer science department.

The 2015-2016 academic year saw the first publications by the Open University of Israel Press. A Goldberg Foundation Prize for Outstanding Research Book was awarded early in the year to Prof. Yoram Bilu of the Hebrew University for his manuscript *With us More than Ever Before: Making the Absent Rebbe Present in Messianic Chabad* (2015). This book will soon be published by the Open University of Israel Press.

Several faculty and staff changes took place during the past year, including Prof. Judith Gal-Ezer's retirement and hence the end of her term as advisor to the president on gender affairs. It was rewarding to us all to watch her, just before retirement, leading the events of the university's forty year celebrations. She is replaced in her advisory capacity on gender affairs by Prof. Sonia Roccas.

Avinoam Lazarov, the Deputy Director General and head of the Planning and Finance Administration, who was also responsible for the multi-year plan, was appointed Director General of the Western Galilee College. Nir Rubinstein was appointed Acting Head of the Planning and Finance Administration to replace Avinoam Lazarov, and Yossi Ma'aori, the Deputy Director of Human Resources, has

accepted responsibility for the implementation of the university's multi-year plan. Boaz Noll was replaced as the deputy resources director by Yael Yativ; and Efrat Avraham-Livne was appointed OUI spokesperson. Dr. Avishai Antonovsky ended his term as head of the Assessment Department and Tali Svirsky replaced him as acting head of the department. Dr. Dafna Idelson, Director of the Research Authority, became Director General of the Online Academia subsidiary, and Yael Shahar took over the directorship of the Research Authority.

I would like to close this introduction with an expression of thanks to the colleagues whose terms of office ended during the past year, and thank particularly Avinoam, Dafna, and Judith for their unstinting dedication and efficiency throughout their years of service to the Open University. I also extend my sincere wishes for success to Dafna, Nir, Sonia, Tali, Yael Shahar, Yael Yativ and Yossi, in their new positions and roles.

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