

Foreword



This President's Report summarizes the main activities of the Open University during the past (2016-2017) academic year in course development, teaching, and research. Our fundraising initiatives, public cultural events, and the variety of extra-academic studies and enrichment programs that we offer to the general public are also highlighted.

Over the past year, the OUI student body numbered 47,656, of whom 44,191 were studying towards undergraduate degrees. Although this number is impressive, it actually represents a decrease of 3.5% from the previous year. While this decrease is less than the decline in student enrollment experienced by other Israeli universities (4.1%), this drop indicates that, in common with them, our main competitors in the Israeli academic market for undergraduate studies are the numerous colleges; a reality that obliges us to take proactive measures.

To this end, we have worked towards increasing our share in the market for higher education by making Open University studies a more attractive option for potential students, and by improving student retention and success rates. To make

our study programs more attractive we took steps to refresh teaching methods and course materials. The Senate, for the first time, defined guidelines for integrating online technologies into study materials and learning formats. Integration of these guidelines began with a program jointly developed by the Dean of Academic Studies and Shoham for a selection of initial courses that new students most frequently choose. The program emphasizes the use of varied educational tools, together with learning technologies designed to enhance teaching pedagogy with a clear definition of learning outcomes. Our goal is to make these courses more attractive for students and more effective in terms of measurable outputs, which are centered on rates of success.

The focus on learning outcomes and success in the initial courses is linked to the improvement of retention rates, which we defined this year as a primary strategic goal. A new working model was created for the Unit of Student Retention in the Deanship of Academic Studies. The unit's mission is to prevent capable students from dropping out and to ensure the successful completion of their study programs. In order to accomplish this goal, the unit initiated cross-organizational activities and processes which are intended to generate relevant information on student progress and to provide them with individual guidance by academic advisors throughout their studies.

In addition to activities concerning the entire student body, we invested heavily in recruiting students from specific target populations and supporting them throughout their studies. This has been particularly manifested in our work with the ultra-Orthodox community, under the direction of Prof. Aviad Heifetz, Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs. Specially designated marketing patterns and tutoring systems were initiated for this population sector, while we continued to expand our support systems for Ethiopian-Israeli students and for Arabic-speaking students.

Also in the realm of academic studies, it is important to note that, at this year's graduation ceremonies in Spring 2017, 55 students, representing the first graduating class of the School for Local Government Employees, received their bachelor's degrees. The school was founded in 2013 as a joint venture of the Union of Local Authorities in Israel and the OUI, to provide higher education for employees

of local authorities. The program is administered by the university's external studies department and is overseen by a steering committee headed by Prof. Yagil Levy. The main program offered is a BA in Social Sciences and Humanities, together with a diploma in Local Government Studies. Five years after the launch of the program, we are gratified to note that, from an initial enrollment of one hundred students in four study groups, the program has grown to include nine hundred students in forty groups all over the country. We warmly congratulate all of the parties involved, on this achievement.

Our faculty members continue with their impressive research work, winning 11 competitive grants from external foundations in the past year, of which seven were Israel Science Foundation grants. Five faculty members were awarded major prizes and acknowledgement for their research books and articles, and another faculty member was elected to the Young Scholars Forum in the Humanities and Social Sciences of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

At the end of the year, Prof. Manor Mandel ended his term as Dean of Research, and was replaced by Prof. Tzahi Weiss. I would like to thank Manor for his dedicated leadership and wish Tzahi the best of luck over the next three years.

Several significant organizational changes were implemented during the past year, especially in the Office of the Dean of Academic Studies and in the departments which are responsible for the development and production of study materials. The Office of the Dean of Academic Studies was regrouped into three operational units: the Department of Academic Counseling, which offers guidance to students; the Unit of Student Retention, which aims to minimize dropout; and the Department for Teaching and Learning, which covers all aspects of teaching at the institutional level. The Unit for Students with Learning Disabilities was transferred from the Dean of Academic Studies to the Dean of Students.

For the development and production of study materials, the OUI publishing house (formerly in the domain of the Director General) and the Unit for Academic Development (which had been part of the Dean of Development and Educational Technology) have been unified into a single department for academic development and publishing,

under the Dean of Development and Educational Technology. With the additional input of Shoham, this new unit will be able to combine all areas of development and production of learning and teaching materials, both print and digital, under a single organizational entity. The newly integrated system will prove crucial to maintaining the university's position at the forefront of the rapidly changing world of higher education in which online technologies are vigorously introduced on a large scale.

On the budgetary front, it appears that we successfully closed the 2016-2017 financial year with a small surplus of approximately 1% of the budget. This was achieved by various cost-saving measures that had been implemented, as well as an increase in funding revenues and donations over the past year. The Planning and Budgeting Committee also granted the university a modest budgetary increase in order to partly compensate us for costs associated with our collective wage agreements, which are not compensated for by a matching increase in tuition fees (which represent about 2/3 of our overall revenue). The governmentally determined tuition fees have not been raised for several years and, in the past two years, have even been reduced, because of a decrease in the CPI. However, it should be noted that the budget surplus in the past year will not have a long-term effect. Consequently, a stable solution to our budgetary problems will only be achieved by continuing our streamlining and fundraising efforts, which will result in savings, improved efficiency and increased revenue.

Naturally, I have only touched on some of the OUI's activities during the past year. The following pages of this report will fill in the picture, providing a more in-depth view of the ways in which we strive to fulfill our mission. Finally, it only remains for me to wish all of us a productive academic year, filled with achievement and success in all areas.

