

Foreword



Prof. Mimi Ajzenstadt, President

The 2021 academic year was distinguished by our continued efforts towards marshalling university resources to ensure its smooth operation during COVID-19. In response to numerous unforeseen challenges posed to our teaching methods and day-to-day operations we implemented the lessons learned in 2020 at the onset of the pandemic.

While our distance learning methods gave the Open University a head start in dealing with the pandemic, we still struggled with numerous issues as we sought to ensure continuity of our high standards in teaching and services to stakeholders, while protecting the health of OUI employees. To this end, we moved 183 frontal courses online, added course websites, and trained additional Zoom tutors. Despite the challenges posed in following an array of constantly changing official regulations, we found solutions to maintaining both health standards and exam integrity when in-person exams were permitted. The OUI has unquestionably successfully survived the COVID-19 period. In addition to providing continuous solutions to our

many and varied stakeholders, we developed and improved services in response to a broader scope of student inquiries, and held ceremonies, events, and training sessions in permitted forums. As you peruse this report, you will read about the technological improvements and modifications we have made to various course components to meet the needs of the current period. In keeping with the OUI's mission, we held a workshop for faculty members and formulated a professional training program in order to accelerate our renowned pedagogically innovative approach.

The current circumstances have reconfirmed the OUI's strengths, even as we continue to develop them. Our volunteering spirit, technological prowess, and flexibility are part of the reason that the National Students' Association survey reported the highest level of student satisfaction of all Israeli universities. We would not have been rated first-place for the eighth consecutive time had it not been for the extraordinary dedication, talent, and enormous investment of the OUI staff, who mobilized to ensure that the OUI continues to lead and accomplish its mission. For this, I am deeply grateful to all of them.

Even though the current situation has encouraged all Israeli universities to introduce distance learning content, the OUI is forging ahead to maintain the distinctive nature of our online ethos, which is not a simple challenge. However, the challenges posed by COVID-19 have helped us accelerate these processes, as we broaden our understanding of this burgeoning field.

An example of one of these processes is the replacement of in-person exams with online assessments. We have begun integrating these alternatives into our system while striving to maintain a balance between in-person exams and online evaluations.

The OUI business intelligence unit has also been the focus of intensive growth. During the past year, rapid decisions by management were often needed. We based our conclusions partly on information provided by the business intelligence unit, who provided accessible and clear institutional data based on past and current information, and future projections. Management received a comprehensive picture

of all stages of the teaching process. The data provided by the center was invaluable for coordinating hundreds of online courses in real time, with thousands of learning groups. This provided us with the information and flexibility necessary to change future course offerings according to government decisions to open or close campuses, and helped us plan or cancel gatherings, organize exams for about 60,000 students, and evaluate their effectivity using lessons learned. The circumstances have made us all recognize the importance of accessible data in the facilitation of decision making. The OUI will continue to apply these advances for teaching and other planning processes.

During the third semester of 2021 and the first semester of 2022, our students were able to benefit from complete flexibility in choosing frontal sessions or online learning. It emerged that students actually prefer online tutoring. We are currently conducting in-depth studies to assess the academic and administrative implications of this significant change in learning.

Meanwhile, our development of OUI study programs has continued with a popular program in cognitive science that program the OUI has been offering for several years; an honors program in computer science and software engineering; and an integrative program combining philosophy, economics, and political science studies. These select programs will enlarge the academic vistas of our students.

In April 2021, we submitted a proposal for a PhD in Education: Technology in Learning Systems to the Council for Higher Education (CHE), after having met the CHE threshold conditions for proposing PhD programs in specific fields. In January 2022, an international committee will visit the OUI in order to assess our proposal. The committee will hold meetings with OUI management, various functionaries, and members of the education and faculty psychology department. The committee will learn about our research resources and meet with students. We hope that this first PhD program will be approved shortly.

Nine new faculty members from different disciplines joined the OUI this year. Although they worked mostly online, they have already contributed to OUI programs and projects.

Research continues to thrive at the OUI, and remains one of our central pursuits, with the continued expansion of our research infrastructure. In the past few years, we have seen a significant increase in the number of OUI scholars who have won impressive grants from competitive foundations such as the ISF, GIF, BSF, the Pazi Foundation, and others. The Research Authority dedicates many resources to assisting senior faculty and lecturers in their research, including helping to submit requests for grants from competitive foundations. In the past three years, three OUI researchers have received grants from the Israel Innovation Authority, and several researchers have registered patents via OpMop, the OUI technology transfer subsidiary.

We congratulate Prof. Haim Sa'adoun, Prof. Ina Blau, Prof. Yagil Levy, and Prof. Tamar Hermann on the awards they have received, reflecting career-long contributions in their fields of expertise. We take pride in the advancements they have made towards scholarly research.

This year, we inaugurated the Astrophysics Research Center (ARCO), a hub for theoretical, observational, and empirical research in astrophysics, cosmology, and relativistic gravity. The center has already attracted interest and will generate collaborations with leading researchers from other institutes.

The OUI has won a tender from the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) to develop a research center in the humanities and social sciences. The center will focus on interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary collaborations between researchers, research fellows, and scholarship recipients. Its emphasis on academic pluralism, diversity, and heterogeneity will encourage the development of new scientific fields. The center was created in order to respond to the increasing influence of digital media on all modern life spheres. It is designed to encourage and bolster interdisciplinary collaboration and synergy, manifested in research, study programs, innovative courses, and other varied enterprises.

The second Woman Scientists Day was held this year online. Five women researchers who joined the OUI this past year presented their research in various fields and discussed their future aspirations.

We joined the IDF Division of Combat Methods and Innovation in inaugurating the National HLS College for Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Change. The college will welcome military commanders who are entrepreneurs and innovation boosters. Its academic, applied, and theoretical framework is designed to encourage the spirit of innovation, entrepreneurship, and change in the IDF and Israel's security system.

As part of its collaboration with the OUI, the HLS College will offer officers and NCOs from various IDF divisions a bachelor's degree as a prerequisite to enrollment in the OUI MBA program. This joint program is a significant step towards strengthening the national innovation infrastructure. I wish the IDF college ongoing success and a productive relationship with the academic world, hoping it will gradually become a platform and a forum for meeting and exchanging ideas between Israel's universities and Israel's defense, security, and rescue forces. We hope that it will also become a bridge for future international collaborations.

This year, we launched an exclusive computer science mentoring program for different student populations, including students of Ethiopian descent, the ultra-Orthodox, students with disabilities, and Arabic speakers. A team of experienced professionals from hi-tech companies, such as Microsoft, mentored 33 students, introducing them to potential development tracks in the industry and employment opportunities within hi-tech companies. The program's success has encouraged us to expand it by inviting OUI graduates to join the mentors' group. An impressive number of graduates volunteered, noting that they would like to give back to the university for all it had given them.

At the CHE's behest, we completed the conversion of all OUI undergraduate curricula to ensure they offer at least 120 credits. This complex process required several steps, including curricula adjustment, identifying affected populations, and system and communication modifications. The cross-organizational process involved departments throughout the university. The thorough preparation of all the involved bodies will enable a smooth conversion to the new system at the beginning of 2022.

A characteristic feature of the 2021 academic year was an increased sense of organizational belonging. The HR administration worked to strengthen the feeling that the OUI community has a haven and a home even in a period characterized by isolation, lockdowns, and working from home. We have been in contact with all our employees countrywide through Zoom lectures and workshops. Instructors from the Elah Center, the Hosen Center and the Center for Financial Development offered tools for coping with stress, personal relationships, parenthood, finances, and home economics for children. The involvement of colleagues from all segments of the OUI community generated a productive exchange and a sense of belonging that strengthened our OUI family, despite our physical absence from our offices and the campus during the pandemic.

Amit Streit, who served as the OUI CEO for the last twelve years, completed his term of office this year, and was replaced by Ruth Shoham. I thank Amit, and wish Ruth much success in her new position.

I conclude this report with a sad farewell to the late Prof. Oren Soffer, who served not only as the OUI Dean of Development and Educational Technology, but was a communication researcher, director, friend, and family man. Oren was a senior faculty member, a dean, and a committed member of the OUI management. He was a leader who was deeply involved in the OUI and who carried out his duties to his last day.

This year, Prof. Abraham Ginzburg passed away. Prof. Ginzburg was the second OUI president, an office he held for over ten years. His years in office were critical in shaping the future path of the university. Prof. Ginzburg navigated the OUI, recruited a nucleus of workers, and encouraged a spirit of volunteering and devotion to the university and wider community. With his great enthusiasm, he led the way in creating a sense of partnership in this national enterprise.

May their memories be a blessing.

M. Aizenstark