

Foreword



This report summarizes the activities of the Open University in the 2017-2018 academic year. It is also the final annual report of my term, and I present it to you, members of the council, with thanks and appreciation for the confidence you have placed in me, and for the help and support which you have provided us.

The *President's Report* is a joint effort of the editorial staff, production team, and all the individuals who shared the responsibility for writing it. This is but a small reflection of the laudable collaboration which exists among members of the OUI community, and is characteristic of the university's entire gamut of activities. You will be able to read about them all in the full body of the report, but naturally, in the following introductory remarks, I shall only be able to touch upon a few highlights.

In 2018, enrollment at the OUI stood at 47,713 students, which is similar to the numbers for 2017. I am also hopeful that the final registration numbers for the first semester of 2019 will be satisfactory.

This year, we worked very intensely on issues of development, teaching, and learning, under the leadership of the Dean of Development and Educational Technology

and the Dean of Academic Studies. The merger of the publishing house and the academic development unit has been completed, resulting in one unified academic development and publishing department under the responsibility of the Dean of Development and Educational Technology. One of the department's main objectives is the improved sophistication and integration of online methods into course materials and teaching practices. The first fruits of these efforts have already ripened by consolidation of methodologies for course development, employing what we call the *pedagogy of online learning sequences*. This methodology is already being offered to students in a limited number of courses, while still undergoing testing in others. This year's "Spotlight" (pg. 47) highlights the academic development and publishing department, offering additional information and details about its new operational methods and different projects.

This year, we also launched the Key Courses program, which focuses on the courses found to be most often selected by new students. The program, generated by a collaboration between the Dean of Academic Studies and the Dean of Development and Educational Technology, and supported by the evaluation department, is intended to increase the appeal of these courses and improve student success rates. The program focuses on defining learning outcomes, and on integrating the courses into a structured learning process that makes use of diverse methods and tailored course websites. The project has been piloted by the Department for Teaching and Learning within the Deanship of Academic Studies, the Pedagogical Unit of the Center for Technology in Distance Education (*Shoham*) in the Deanship of Development and Educational Technologies, partnering with the Unit of Student Retention, also in the Office of the Dean of Academic Studies.

The Key Courses program is an inseparable part of the university-wide efforts made by the Unit of Student Retention towards increasing student success rates and retention. This year, a special mode of operation was launched, to identify success-inhibiting factors at an early stage (before dropout takes place), and address them through individual academic advising.

In the area of learning, several new study programs were offered this year, among them: a track in new media and political activism towards a bachelor's degree in political

science, international relations and communications, which is offered entirely online, including tutoring; and a master's degree in history, in which most of the teaching is also online. Towards the end of the year, an agreement was signed between the Civil Service Commission and the OUI regarding the opening of a school for civil servants, based on the modus operandi of the School for Local Government. In the new initiative, civil servants will study towards a bachelor's degree in a structured program in the social sciences and humanities that includes a diploma in public policy. Three study groups will open in this framework in Fall 2019.

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) granted us the autonomy this year to open graduate study programs leading to master's degrees, thereby making us equal to all other universities in Israel recognized by the CHE. In the framework of this autonomy, we have already been authorized by the Planning and Budget Committee to offer a master's degree program in government and public policy without having to submit an additional request for its accreditation by the CHE. The significance of this autonomy is not only in the actual recognition of the OUI's status, but also, and perhaps primarily, because it is a precondition for submitting a proposal for accreditation of doctoral studies. Thus, we have come significantly closer to achieving this goal.

This year, six new senior faculty members have been appointed in the fields of earth sciences, education, management, mathematics, software engineering, and life sciences. Another two faculty members – in earth sciences and in literature – will begin their roles at the OUI in the first semester of 2019. Five more appointment processes are due to be completed during the course of 2019.

In 2018, changes took place within the major offices at the university. Prof. Aviad Heifetz completed his term as Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs and Prof. Sarah Guri-Rosenblit was appointed to replace him; Prof. Manor Mendel completed his term as Dean of Research and was replaced by Prof. Tzahi Weiss; and Prof. Oren Soffer replaced Prof. Sarah Guri-Rosenblit as Dean of Development and Educational Technology. We extend our thanks and congratulations to them all.

The Research Authority has been extremely active this year under the professional and dedicated management of Leora Azoulay, who assumed the position of director at the beginning of 2018. The Research Authority budget has been significantly increased. We acquired a high performance computer system, which is now in use, and are building a computer lab for the study of language processing and artificial intelligence.

Members of our faculty have excelled this year in receiving research grants. It is noteworthy that the high rate of Israel Science Foundation (ISF) grants received by the OUI faculty (43.6% of the total proposals submitted) is above the ISF national average. Of particular significance were two ISF grants awarded for the acquisition of basic computerization equipment. These grants mark the first time, after many requests, that OUI researchers have been allowed to submit proposals to the ISF for the funding of basic research equipment. This achievement was added to the recognition of the OUI by the Israel Innovation Authority as an independent research university, and to the invitation of our Dean of Research to join the Forum of Vice Presidents for Research as an observer. All of these clearly point to the strengthening of the OUI's position as a research university.

During 2018, the Evaluation Department underwent a makeover. The process was led by Dr. Einat Notea-Koren, the new director of the department, under whose leadership a new professional team was solidified. The department currently is active in three major areas: evaluation design, which oversees new processes and projects; applied research on the basis of existing data; and analysis, based on data science. The department provides the various OUI units with important and reliable information, and with precise, professional analyses, assisting decision makers and process leaders navigate towards desired outcomes.

Resource development for the OUI also gained major momentum this year with the establishment of the Israel Friends of the OUI, which proved itself from the outset. Also noted were increased activity and a rise in contributions from England, the establishment of a Friends association in France, and major fundraising in Latin America.

With respect to the budget, we managed to complete the 2017-2018 year with a balanced budget. However, the long-term picture requires that we continue to be vigilant and make efforts to improve efficiency, to save, and to increase income, while continuing to strengthen ourselves academically; in development, teaching and research.

Allow me to seal this report with a few impressions and personal words addressed to the members of the OUI community. The Open University is, in many senses, a large and complex institution, but at the same time, it is a small, intimate organization, in which almost everything makes its way straight to the Office of the President on the third floor of the Plaza Building. As a result, we deal, on a daily basis, with problems requiring solutions; with various difficulties, deliberations, and decision making, which often have no simple answers.

The conclusion of my term, nevertheless, enables me to reflect upon the period of my presidency, if not from a bird's-eye view, certainly from above the day-to-day routine. From this observation point, I feel only gratitude for the opportunity which was given to me, to become part of this singular institution and to learn about a unique facet of Israeli academia – The Open University of Israel – which was so new and fascinating to me.

The identity of the university as an organization is complex, of course, and includes the vision at its very foundations and the goals it strives to realize in both its routine operations and long term programs. Yet, in the end, it is you, members of the academic faculty and the administrative staff, who

shape the image of the university and make it what it is. Your professionalism, dedication, and complete identification with the institution are the hallmarks of who you are, and working with you has been a particularly enriching and rewarding experience for me.

Although we have not achieved all of the goals, nor made all of the changes we set out to implement, my feeling is that what we have accomplished together, and what you have done with my blessings, enable me to complete five years of service at the Open University with a great sense of satisfaction, accompanied by a large debt of gratitude to a great many of you.

Now, the time has come to extend my wholehearted wishes for success to the incoming president, Prof. Mimi Ajzenstadt. The challenges on the road ahead are not simple, encompassing the highly competitive environment in which institutions of higher education in Israel operate, the dynamic changes in academic teaching, and also the attempts by the legislator to undermine the independence of academia. I wish Mimi and the OUI under her leadership, as well as Israeli academia at large, success in confronting these challenges.

Kobi Metzger



President of The Open University of Israel