

Spotlight: Teaching in the Era of COVID-19

The second semester of 2020 took a sharp turn on March 13, 2020, when the OUI was confronted with the enormous challenge of opening a semester completely online, due to the COVID-19 epidemic. All frontal study sessions were converted to online groups; a move that forced all of the university's administrative and academic departments to make a concentrated effort at short notice.

Student Support

In order to switch to online teaching, a platform had to be created for continuous communication with the students, to keep them updated about the numerous changes being made. To this end, a dedicated "COVID-19 messages" area was created on the OUI website, to convey latest directives, FAQs, messages, etc.

The division for the development of study skills of the Teaching and Learning Department took measures to provide a comprehensive response to the students, some of whom were taking part in online tutoring sessions for the first time. At the onset of the crisis, all workshops and individual tutoring sessions switched to an online format. Specific training was developed to guide the students in their online courses, and instructional sessions were offered near the semester's end to prepare students for alternative evaluation exams (in Hebrew and Arabic). Attendance at the sessions was impressive: In spring semester 2020, the preparatory sessions were attended by 1,270 students and more than 5,000 students took part in instructional sessions for alternative evaluations.

A new website with workshops and training programs was offered to students in the following subjects: new students, academic writing, independent learning, advanced courses, writing seminar papers; and specific workshops for Arabic-speaking students, and for students from the School for Local Government and the School of Public Policy programs.

Tutor training

The sweeping adjustment from frontal to online teaching necessitated the immediate training of hundreds of tutors in online teaching. Online sessions trained tutors to use zoom. In addition to general training, workshops adjusted to the specific needs of different departments were offered, with an emphasis on online teaching. A reinforced observation and feedback team received comprehensive training, with

a special focus on observing online teaching sessions to assist the tutors in enhancing their distance-tutoring skills. Occasional information sheets were distributed to teaching staff with instructions and tips to complement their training and assist them in adjusting to the new reality.

Technological tools

The rapid switch to comprehensive online teaching necessitated the immediate development of tools and settings to allow students to access Zoom sessions via the course websites, including thousands of new live and recorded tutoring sessions. These changes all needed to correspond to the changed video-viewing policy during the COVID-19 period.

Shoham was in close daily contact with the Zoom company regarding the online transmissions, recordings, and handling of failures resulting from the extreme load on the systems. It also purchased and installed dozens of wacom and other tablets for tutors who began teaching from home, and set up new Zoom posts in different learning centers.

In spring semester 2020, about 1,000 active online study groups participated in over 10,000 tutoring sessions during more than 27,000 transmission hours.

Alternative evaluations

Frontal class exams were replaced by remote online evaluation processes, which included home exams, assignments, and oral exams via Zoom. The academic departments participated in formulating the new evaluation models. Within a short period of time, a new testing policy was determined which involved reformulating work procedures and adapting the computerized systems. Some necessary modifications included updating the system handling student queries, building a new exam system, upgrading course websites, etc. Guidance sessions helped students prepare for home tests and allowed teaching faculty to become better acquainted with the new systems and procedures. Online information pages available on the OUI website listed the instructions for each testing format.

In spring semester 2020, over 400 courses held remote exams. In all, over 55,000 students were tested on approximately 1,200 exam dates.