

Foreword



Prof. Mimi Ajzenstadt, President

The start of the 2019-2020 academic year found me, like presidents of other academic institutions, busy planning the upcoming academic year. As usual, I dealt with matters such as improving teaching and learning, focusing and deepening research, recruiting new faculty, locating potential groups of new students, creating closer connections with other institutions and with industry, and many other such issues. The first semester proceeded routinely, and in retrospect, one could say that we naively thought the year would continue as usual. Little did we know what was in store at the beginning of 2020. Rumors began to seep in about a virus, but it still seemed so removed from our reality. In February, however, and especially at the beginning of March, it became clear that the OUI, and society in general, were facing a storm that was fast becoming a blizzard. Even then, we could not have foretold the numerous changes to society and to academia that would be brought about in its wake.

This report summarizes a complicated academic year; a year in which we managed to work within our familiar framework for one semester before making a sharp turn in direction. It describes how the OUI coped with an emergency routine that became the "new normal."

Early in the first semester, we held ceremonies for the President's List and for the second annual Dean of Students' Social Involvement Award. The President's List ceremony was, as always, moving, and the students were inspiring. The Social Involvement Award publicizes the voluntary activism of students. It encourages students to assist weaker populations, promote social and environmental causes, work to narrow social gaps, and improve tolerance and solidarity in Israeli society. Many OUI students work full-time, and yet find time and energy to devote to numerous social causes. The ceremony spotlighted their efforts and thrilled us all.

In early March, OUI management began planning to face the COVID-19 crisis. I chaired a steering committee which formed work teams to prepare the OUI for handling the crisis and for implementing an emergency arrangement. We initially thought that the crisis would be limited in duration. As time passed, however, we began to understand that we must cope with a situation with many implications for the long term that would reach far beyond a single semester. Indeed, since that time, instruction has been mainly online. We have also replaced frontal exams with a completely alternative testing system.

In our swift shift to a wholly distance learning framework, we were faced with significant challenges. Despite our considerable experience in online education, we had to invest great effort in making all courses accessible to our entire student body, including those not initially offered online. The professional infrastructure developed by the university over many years enabled us to meet the enormous challenge of teaching most courses online so that students would have access to nearly the entire curriculum online. In the past few months, distance learning has, out of necessity, become universal. Yet for us at the OUI, online education has always been much more than a mere technical tool. Our framework depends on comprehensive processes

that combine professional expertise with pedagogical understanding of technology-based learning, using video and other online tools. Our distance instruction utilizes active and dynamic course sites operated by skilled teaching staff. An extensive support system consists of technological, academic, and – equally important – administrative support to meet the various needs of students. The combination of high-quality distance learning with an effective support system is unique to the OUI. Throughout the year, the OUI's leadership in online instruction has proven vital in dealing with the unprecedented situation.

Behind the scenes, we invested much effort in providing stable infrastructure and in ensuring that the various systems would be able to withstand the considerably expanded volume of online activity and number of broadcast participants. To this end, we set up a highly effective operating system. Substantial development allowed the computerization of many operations, and both faculty and student support systems were significantly upgraded. These processes involved close cooperation between the Dean of Academic Studies, the Center for Technology in Distance Education (Shoham), the department of study centers, the computer center, the call centers, and, of course, the academic tutors, without whom nothing would have been possible.

Along with all the challenges mentioned above, we faced the difficulty of adjusting and reacting swiftly to policies that kept changing on a daily basis. In spite of all this, we managed to offer a full study semester, and retain an impressive student body, thanks to the full commitment of our entire university community, including the academic and administrative staff, and the coordinated efforts of the entire management team. I thank them all for their cooperation and dedication.

Online learning during the COVID-19 crisis and the ensuing difficult economic situation in Israel meant that many students were faced with a number of challenges. The number of students who require assistance and are entitled to scholarships has significantly grown. In order to prevent the dropout of students with financial concerns or with disabilities, and to meet the needs created by the crisis,

the OUI has undertaken to grant financial aid so that all students can realize their dreams and continue their studies without interruption.

Many of our staff members now work from home, in compliance with Ministry of Health regulations and out of concern for their health.

This report gives a detailed description of the various activities carried out during this difficult period. I invite you all to read it and be impressed.

OUI researchers continue to excel. Numerous articles written by OUI scholars were published this year in leading journals, including two articles in *Science* and one in *Science Advanced*. Thirteen researchers in the humanities, social sciences, and life sciences won grants from the Israel Science Foundation, including an equipment grant, and a publishing grant. This is an impressive increase of grants awarded by the Israel Science Foundation. In addition, other researchers have won research grants from other competitive foundations such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Arabic Language Academy in Israel.

This year, the OUI expanded its ties with industry. Prof. Leonid Barenboim of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science won a research grant from the Israel Innovation Authority Magnetron track, designed to transfer academic knowledge to industry. The OUI joined with Ben-Gurion University of the Negev to launch a commercial company for pooled COVID-19 diagnostics, based on the joint research of Prof. Noam Shental of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science and Prof. Angel Porgador and Dr. Tomer Hertz from Ben-Gurion University. Dr. Elishai Ezra Tsur of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Sciences won a grant from Intel and Accenture for his research "Implementation of neuromorphic nonlinear adaptive control in wheelchair-mounted assistive robotic arm", as part of the Intel Neuromorphic Research Community (INRC).

This year, the OUI offered practicum courses in relevant organizations that allow students studying fields in which practical experience is not mandatory to acquire work

experience compatible with their studies. This experience is useful for developing skills and expertise, and for establishing contacts in their chosen professions. The courses have both theoretical and experiential components and include about 120 hours of practicum in a job relevant to their field of study. The courses are offered to undergraduate students in economics, management, and communication. Students already enrolled in such programs have expressed high satisfaction, and feel that the practical experience is extremely relevant to the academic content. As mentioned above, the first part of the year passed smoothly. Students studied, gathered experience at their respective organizations, and received feedback. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the nature of the courses changed, and students have become acquainted with the special issues characterizing different organizations in an era of distance management.

From the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, we have assisted and advised other institutions on technological aspects of distance education management and learning (use of Zoom, individual guidance of staff members in using the system, and discussions with senior management and computer center staff about the entire process). The Academic Development and Publishing Department joined in the enormous undertaking required during the epidemic period. In the second semester of 2020, the OUI made 110 books by Lamda Scholarship accessible to non-OUI students and lecturers from all over the country as a gesture of goodwill. Approximately 30,000 individuals visited the site and read over a million pages of our superb OUI textbooks.

Concurrently, the Academic Development and Publishing Department has been working on making all learning materials for the coming semesters accessible. This guarantees that all students will be able to receive clear online versions of their learning materials even if difficulties arise in the distribution of hard copies.

So far, over 1000 learning materials have been uploaded via the online systems. This has allowed thousands of students with disabilities to realize their right to academic studies of the highest quality. We are proud to stand at the forefront of this meaningful enterprise!

The OUI has also offered its finest academic products to the general public: reference books and textbooks, online lectures, and a joint podcast with Galei Zahal Radio. Prof. Tamar Hermann and Prof. Oren Soffer hosted podcasts which attracted many listeners and which focused on academic topics and research in numerous fields. A broadcast with a live audience marked the anniversary of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and dealt with the topic of political assassination. Several broadcasts dealing with loneliness and epidemics were also aired.

On a more personal note, this stressful and complex period helped me fully understand the meaning of "OUI spirit." The complete commitment of each and every OUI staff member, their spirit of initiative and willingness to contribute went above and beyond expectations. For this, I am deeply grateful.

In the new academic year, we continue to face numerous challenges. We must continue to develop our expertise in distance learning in order to remain at the forefront of teaching and research in Israel and internationally. We must find ways to maintain and develop our academic excellence, expand research, and stay relevant to the students who continue to express their confidence in us year after year. Our student body has grown considerably this year. For the seventh consecutive year, a student poll across all of Israel's academic institutions rated us first in teaching quality.

M. Aizerstark