

 **THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF ISRAEL**

**Department of Sociology,  
Political Science and  
Communication**

**SELF-EVALUATION REPORT**

**Sociology**

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**The Open University of Israel**  
**SOCIOLOGY SELF-EVALUATION REPORT**  
**Executive Summary**

**The University:** The Open University of Israel (OUI) is unique on the Israeli academic scene. Although it resembles other universities in its pursuit of excellence in teaching and research, it differs from them in its educational mission – to widen access to quality higher education, and in its method of instruction – distance teaching. The OUI is dedicated to the creation of university-level materials that are suitable for independent learning and to the development and implementation of versatile means of support for individual study.

To date, the OUI has prepared over 700 university-level courses. It offers a variety of study programs toward Bachelor's and Master's degrees in a wide range of disciplines in Sciences, Humanities, Social Sciences and Engineering. The academic development and teaching activities are carried out by seven academic departments, backed by a sophisticated, centralized administrative system.

In keeping with its mission, the Open University has created a singular framework for university studies that enables uncompromising adherence to pre-set, high standards, without imposing admission requirements on undergraduates, without dictating specific yearly loads and without demanding regular classroom attendance. Student screening at the OUI is solely through performance.

The elaborate teaching method developed by the OUI allows students to study throughout Israel and abroad, whenever and wherever, alongside other personal and occupational obligations.

The gates of the OUI are open to all; however, only individuals who are intellectually inclined to acquire up-to-date advanced academic knowledge, capable of doing so, and willing to work hard, can meet the strictly maintained level of academic excellence.

OUI study materials are prepared by field specific experts. They undergo thorough (internal and external) peer review to ensure their scholarly quality. Extensive additional measures and quality control procedures are employed to ascertain their didactic merit as well. As a result, OUI texts are highly regarded and widely used in all Israeli universities.

**Students:** In the 2008-2009 academic year, close to 46,000 students took OUI undergraduate courses and more than 3,250 took graduate courses (in full-time-equivalent terms, this represents about 18,884 undergraduates); 2,386 students completed various undergraduate programs and 333 received Master's degrees.

**Studies at the OUI:** Unlike traditional universities, at the OUI, students enroll in courses each semester. Study materials (books, study guides, readers, etc.) are mailed to them before the beginning of the semester with instructions and homework assignments for the entire semester. They study mainly on their own, and submit assignments according to a predetermined schedule. The individual learning process is supported by detailed personal feedback on assignments and by various learning aids, printed and electronic, mailed or delivered via the course websites. Tutorials held at study centers throughout the country help to clarify and discuss the subject matter and encourage socialization with peers. At the end of the semester, students

take monitored written final exams. Since the assignments and exams are prepared in advance, the same pre-set high standard is preserved throughout the country, regardless of study center or tutor.

**Academic staff:** The academic staff of each department consists of senior faculty, academic teaching staff – course coordinators – and tutors. The senior faculty (about 80 members in all) is the academic leadership; its members initiate study programs, and are in charge of the development of all course materials. Senior faculty members are also responsible for quality control. In particular, they supervise all ongoing instructional activities, by guiding and monitoring the performance of course coordinators (about 300), who, in turn, are responsible for the smooth, effective running of the teaching system. Each course offered by the OUI has a course coordinator, usually a member of the academic teaching staff, whose tasks include hiring and supervising tutors, preparing new assignments and exams for each semester, maintaining the course website and enriching it with appropriate materials. Tutors (about 1000 in all), whose number in each course depends on the number and geographical dispersion of students enrolled, conduct group tutorial sessions, grade homework assignments and exams, and provide personal support when necessary.

**Technologies:** Extensive administrative and instructional services are provided to students and academic staff via the internet. The OUI invests considerable efforts in learning technologies: *Shoham*, the Center for Technology in Distance Education, investigates and adapts or creates platforms and technologies for use on the course websites. Faculty and teaching staff take part in the endeavor to use educational technologies wisely, creatively, innovatively and effectively. The versatile outcomes provide a multitude of means to remain academically updated, to liven up the lonely process of individual learning and to bridge physical distances.

**The Department of Sociology, Political Science and Communication:** The department, one of seven academic departments at the OUI, was established in 1997, when the OUI was reorganized on a departmental basis. It is composed of three disciplinary groups – Sociology, Political Science & International Relations, and Communication. Each group is responsible for developing and teaching the courses in its discipline. The head of each group is one of its senior faculty members. At the end of 2009, there were 9 senior faculty members in the department: 3 full professors, 2 associate professors, 3 senior lecturers and 1 lecturer; one full professor from the Hebrew University serves as a development consultant in Communication. In October 2010 a new faculty member in Communication joined the department; at this stage, as a visiting lecturer. In addition, there were 50 course coordinators and 180 tutors.

The department offers single and dual-disciplinary undergraduate programs in Sociology, dual-disciplinary BA programs in Political Science & International Relations and in Communication, and BA programs in Social Sciences with an emphasis on Political Science, on International Relations, on Public Policy, and on Communication. In addition the department offers two interdisciplinary MA programs – in Democracy Studies and in Cultural Studies (in cooperation with the Department of Literature, Language and the Arts). In the last 5 years, 1,900 students graduated from the department, which represents 18% of OUI graduates during that period. In 2009, 10,952 students took undergraduate courses offered by the department.

**Sociology courses, programs and students:** The first course in Sociology was offered in 1983. Since then, a large number of new courses covering varied topics and subfields have been developed and periodically updated. In 2009, the OUI offered 29 undergraduate courses in Sociology on introductory, intermediate and advanced

levels, which corresponds to the course offering in Sociology programs in other universities.

Sociology was initially studied in the framework of broad programs of study leading to a degree in Social Sciences or in Social Sciences and Humanities. A program in Sociology as part of a dual-disciplinary BA degree has been offered since 1993. A general program leading to a BA in Social Sciences with an emphasis on Sociology, which had been offered since 1998, was replaced in 2007 with a single-disciplinary BA program in Sociology. Since 2001, we have also offered a division of studies in Sociology that can be combined with single-disciplinary programs in other fields. The new MA program in Cultural Studies has been offered since 2009.

For the purpose of this report we defined a "Sociology student" as a student who was enrolled in at least one sociology course during an academic year and had taken at least four courses in Sociology until and including that year, that include at least one of the courses: Introduction to the Social Sciences (10161), Introduction to Sociology (10134), Introduction to Anthropology (10153) or Trends in Israeli Society (10495). According to this definition, 7,149 Sociology students were enrolled at the OUI in the last five years. During the same period, 333 students were awarded Bachelor's degrees in Sociology (single-and dual-disciplinary programs); the average final grade of graduates between 2007 and 2009 was 81.3. In 2009, 70 students were registered in the new MA program in Cultural Studies.

**Research:** Senior faculty members conduct research as a major part of their role. Although their small number limits the overall impact of their work, individually they achieve high research standards, as measured by the numbers of articles published in leading, refereed professional journals and books, research grants, memberships on journal editorial boards and contributions at international conferences. The OUI Research Authority encourages research by helping OUI faculty to locate external funding sources and submit proposals, and by competitively allocating grants from its internal research fund. The Research authority also encourages and supports research among members of the academic teaching staff who are involved in research.

**Quality control mechanisms:** Due to the nature of distance teaching, the OUI has developed quality control mechanisms for almost every product, process and function. These mechanisms enable the University to continuously examine its strengths and weaknesses and to address problems when necessary.

The department maintains rigorous academic standards with respect to courses and teaching. We maintain an ongoing quality assurance and control system whereby courses undergo extensive refereeing during the development phase, and periodic assessment concerning adequacy, relevance and scientific rigor while the course is being taught. Furthermore, the quality of teaching is routinely monitored by means of student feedback gathered each semester, samples of assignments and examinations, summary statistics regarding students' achievements, and visits paid to tutorial sessions by the course coordinators and the senior faculty. All course coordinators are evaluated every year. The self-evaluation process highlighted our strengths and weaknesses, and motivated thinking about ways to overcome weak areas.

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