

Politics and Higher Education Make a Volatile Mixture

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Time was when Israeli higher education (IHE) was as lioning a non-issue as national post office box allocation policy. National funding was provided without comment and autonomously distributed by the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC, in Hebrew VATAT) of the Council for Higher Education (CHE), 18 of whose 25 members represented Israel's eight research universities. After many years of rapid growth, student bodies have doubled over the last 10 years and over 170,000 Israeli students are now seeking Bachelor degrees. Over half (57%) learn outside universities: about 25% in colleges, which do not engage in original research; 11% more in teacher-training colleges; and the rest in the Open University. Government funding for IHE is now 5.5 billion shekels or \$1.1 billion a year.

Any activity involving that much of the national population and budget is bound to attract political attention. And indeed, after decades of treating IHE as untouchable, politicians of all stripes have begun weighing in. This trend has alarmed Israeli academics who worry that the IHE system, which has produced one of the world's best educated workforces and most advanced high-tech economies, is at risk. Replacing the long-term, professionally informed view of senior educators with the short-term expediency of politicians, they warn, could result in disastrous mistakes and educational mediocrity.

Some politicians, in turn, claimed that the IHE system and the CHE that runs it are too conservative, ignore new realities and are insufficiently responsive to social demand. However, Prof. Jacob Ziv, President of the Israel Academy and a former PBC Chairman noted that "it's simply not true that the system is frozen and conservative". Since 1990, the PBC has accredited 16 public colleges, 5 private colleges and 23 educational seminaries. In conjunction with the Israel Academy, the PBC also helped found and fund an Israel Science Foundation (ISF) and it participates actively in national research partnerships (through TELEM).

This debate moved from the theoretical to the immediate level when, in late 2001, Israel's new Minister of Education Limor Livnat decided to reform the CHE itself, increasing the number of college representatives to 6, and reducing the number of university representatives to a minority of 12. Israeli researchers feared that the former would have little sympathy for the expensive, but essential, original university research that has made Israel a world scientific power.

Since there was little prior experience in containing such a head-on confrontation, the rhetoric quickly escalated. One former university president warned that "a lifetime of work [on building IHE] is on the verge of destruction," other academics openly spoke of boycotting the new CHE or striking. In return, Livnat reportedly characterized the CHE and universities as an elite cartel. Even sympathetic members reported that the Knesset no longer truly understood or respected the CHE, a dramatic historic reversal. The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities was so concerned by the unfolding scenario that, in January 2002, it met in an emergency session (only the second in its history) to discuss both the immediate threat and the likelihood of escalating attacks on academic autonomy.

Hebrew University President Menachem Magidor notes the irony of the situation. The whole point of creating the colleges was to offer a less expensive (to the government) educational alternative that could provide access to IHE to the greatest number of students not needing advanced degrees. Now Israel's research-oriented universities are being blamed for taking 4.0 billion shekels of the CHE budget, while the colleges get only a 1.2 billion. That is, the CHE is being faulted for building a successful, two-tier, maximal-access IHE system that still preserves excellence, i.e., that works as planned and delivers as promised.

In the end the two sides met, made changes to the list of specific CHE members – but not their relative numbers – and the cabinet approved the revised proposal by a 19 to 2 margin on February 17, 2002. While this time around no greater harm was done, the rules of the game have been changed forever. IHE is now subject to the political give-and-take found in many other Western countries; and it must adopt many of the same solutions.

"Israeli higher education is a great success story," notes Ziv. "Part of our job, from now on, is to make the Knesset and others more aware of that success, and to explain its relevance to Israel's future". The Israel Academy has already appointed working groups to help Israel's academic community do just that. The result should be better public understanding of the need for excellence in Israeli research and education.

