

Committee for the Evaluation of Hebrew Language Programmes

Hebrew University of Jerusalem The Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages Evaluation Report

October 2012

Contents

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Letter of Appointment

Appendix 2 - Schedule of the visit

Chapter 1: General Background

At its meeting on July 25, 2010, the Council for Higher Education (CHE) decided to evaluate study programmes in the field of Hebrew Language during the academic year 2011 - 2012.

Following the decision of the CHE, the Minister of Education, who serves ex officio as Chairperson of the CHE, appointed a Committee consisting of:

- Prof. Geoffrey Khan, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, England–Chair
- Prof. Shmuel Bolozky, Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies, University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA
- Prof. Jan Joosten, Faculty of Protestant Theology, University of Strasbourg, France
- Prof. Aharon Maman, The Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages, Hebrew University, Israel
- Prof. Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, Department of Historical and philological sciences, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Sorbonne, France

Ms. Alisa Elon - Coordinator of the Committee on behalf of the CHE.

Within the framework of its activity, the Committee was requested to submit the following documents to CHE:

A final report on each of the evaluated departments,

A general report on the state of the discipline in the Israeli higher education system, including recommendations to the CHE for standards and potential state-wide changes in the evaluated field of study.

The Committee's letter of appointment is attached as **Appendix 1**.

The entire process was conducted in accordance with the CHE's Guidelines for Self-Evaluation (of October 2010).

¹ In accordance with the CHE's policy, Prof. Aharon Maman did not participate in the evaluation of Hebrew Language studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to prevent the appearance of a conflict of interests.

Chapter 2-Committee Procedures

The Committee held its first meetings on April 15, 2012, during which it discussed fundamental issues concerning higher education in Israel, the quality assessment activity, as well as Hebrew Language Study programmes.

In April 2012, the Committee held its first round of visits with site visits to the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University and the University of Haifa.

The second round of visits was carried out in June 2012 with site visits to Bar-Ilan University and Ben-Gurion University.

This report deals with the evaluation of Hebrew language studies at the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In preparation of this report, the committee met with administrators, senior and junior faculty, and students at the bachelors, masters and doctoral levels. The analysis given below reflects the results of those meetings coupled with the information provided by Hebrew University in its self-evaluation report.

The Committee's visit to the Hebrew University took place on April16-17, 2012. The Committee thanks the management of the Hebrew University and the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages for their self-evaluation report and for their hospitality towards the Committee during its visit at the institution.

The schedule of the visit is attached as **Appendix 2**.

Chapter 3: Evaluation Hebrew language studies at the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

* This Report relates to the situation current at the time of the visit to the institution, and does not take account of any subsequent changes. The Report records the conclusions reached by the Evaluation Committee based on the documentation provided by the institution, information gained through interviews, discussion and observation as well as other information available to the Committee.

Background

The Hebrew University was officially opened in 1925. The University was fully accredited by the Council of Higher Education in 1962. According to the institution's self-evaluation report, during 2009 23,249 students were enrolled at the university as follows: 11,445 B.A. students, 6,820 M.A. students and 2,667 Ph.D. students.

The Department of Hebrew Language at the Hebrew University was established in 1933. In 2007 the program for the study of Jewish Languages at this university was integrated into the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages.

According to the university's self-evaluation report, the number of students in Hebrew Language program at the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages during 2010 was as follows: 55 B.A. students, 41 M.A. and 17 Ph.D. students.

Mission and Goals

Two study programmes are run in the department, viz. the programme in Hebrew language and the programme in Jewish languages and literatures. The missions of the two study programmes are well articulated.

The Hebrew language programme aims to acquaint students with the development of the Hebrew language from its first attestations up until Modern Hebrew as it is written and spoken today. The bulk of teaching is based on source texts and the intention is to train students to develop linguistic analytical skills in reading these sources. The understanding of the background of the Hebrew sources is enhanced by requiring students to study some Arabic and Aramaic. This programme is well designed as a means of delivering a high quality teaching in Hebrew language. The range of courses offered in the programme reflects the stated mission. It is clear that each tenured member of staff plays a crucial role in the delivery of the programme. This high quality teaching programme clearly could not be sustained with any reduction in the number of tenured staff in the department, without relying on core teaching provided by retired members of staff, which the Evaluation Committee does not regard as desirable. We **recommend**, therefore, that the number of tenured positions be maintained after the retirement of current staff in the next few years and consolidated by an additional position (see below). One area that could be developed further, especially in the light of student demand, is contemporary vernacular Israeli Hebrew, which does not play a prominent role in the programme. We recommend that the department take this into account when making new recruitments in the future. The programme includes a series of analytical courses on the phonology, morphology and syntax of Hebrew. We recognize that these are essential elements in the programme, but **recommend** that the department consider collaborating in the provision of teaching with staff from other departments, especially Linguistics, who have a research interest in Hebrew.

A key element in the mission of the Faculty of Humanities is to bring together communities of students and staff of the same discipline within disciplinary 'schools'. We believe this is a positive development which will enhance the activities of the department under evaluation. Students and staff in the department would undoubtedly benefit from closer collaboration with colleagues in Linguistics, especially those whose research includes Hebrew. We **recommend** that this collaboration be further developed on the level of teaching and research seminars within the framework of the School of Language Sciences. We would like to stress, however, the importance of also maintaining a focused specialization within the department.

The programme in Jewish Languages and Literatures aims to provide students with a firm foundation in Jewish languages, both in their written and spoken forms, and the literatures of these languages. The programme also aims to show students the relationship of the Jewish Languages to Hebrew and the interrelationship between the Jewish languages. The mission of this programme integrates well with the Hebrew language programme, especially since a key element of the Jewish languages is their Hebrew component. The available courses listed in the current taught programme are largely restricted to Ladino and Modern North African Arabic, which are delivered by staff from the department. These are important Jewish languages, but this restriction of the courses is regrettable, especially since experts in various other Jewish languages can be found elsewhere in the university, either in tenured or adjunct teaching positions. We recommend, therefore, that these other members of staff be brought into the ambit of the Jewish languages teaching programme. We recommend in particular that consideration be given to including of the teaching of Yiddish, Judaeo-Romance, Judaeo-Malayalam, Judaeo-Persian, Jewish neo-Aramaic and premodern Judaeo-Arabic in the programme, all of which contain a Hebrew component that is important for the history of the Hebrew language.

Administrative Organizational Structure. Content, Structure and Scope of the programme

The new structure connecting the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages together with the Department of Linguistics through the School of Language Sciences allows consolidation of courses, e.g., a single large course of Introduction to Linguistics, thus bringing students together and exposing them to different approaches to the study of language. It will apparently take some time before all staff members are ready to face the new reality. With most senior staff working from a philological perspective, they are not certain that collaborating with theoretical linguists would work, and are also worried that with the linguists being essentially interested in Modern Hebrew, coverage of ancient and medieval Hebrew texts, which has always been the strength of the Hebrew Language Department at the Hebrew University, may be negatively affected. It appears that the recent phenomenon of splitting new appointments 50%-50% between the Department and the School of Language Studies is intended to facilitate such collaboration and is particularly favoured by the Faculty of Humanities. The Evaluation Committee recommends that such collaboration with theoretical linguistics be consolidated in the future while maintaining a clear focus on philological approaches within the department. We recommend that the department plan their future recruitments in a strategic way in collaboration with the School. It is the opinion of the Committee, however, that the most effective way of achieving this is not to split all future appointments across the department and the School but rather to consolidate the department as a centre of philological excellence and to develop

collaboration without formal administrative merger. Effective collaboration in teaching and research across departmental boundaries can be carried out without formal mergers. The policy of 50% appointments in the School runs the risk of diminishing the critical mass of the department and the Committee recommends that this be discontinued. A more satisfactory arrangement would be for the School to act as an umbrella facilitating collaboration between departments rather than itself becoming a higher staffed department. The committee would like to stress in particular the extremely high reputation that the Hebrew language programme has on the international scene. Outside of Israel there are no programmes that have a specific focus on Hebrew language, rather these subjects are represented by isolated members of staff who are located within broader units. There is, therefore, no concentration of excellence outside of Israel as is found in the programme of Hebrew language in the Hebrew University and in other Israeli universities. There is a danger that the attrition of the department's critical mass could affect the programme's uniqueness, its international reputation as a centre of research excellence, and its attractiveness to students drawn to it by its reputation. The Evaluation Committee recommends, therefore, that the unique identity of the Hebrew Language programme be robustly protected.

Furthermore given the fact that the founders of the Hebrew University believed that the study and use of the Hebrew language played a central role in the mission of the university and that the Hebrew language is still playing a vital role in the building of the State of Israel and so is manifestly of national importance, the Evaluation Committee was dismayed to find that the Hebrew University did not regard the department of Hebrew language as having a special status and that the department was left vulnerable to economically driven metrics based on student numbers.

In addition to its regular BA, MA, and PhD programmes, the department has been innovative in trying to address the various interests of its students and increase enrollments by offering a variety of tracks and choices. Thus, it offers four tracks of study in its MA programme: (1) Research; (2) Non-Research; (3) Language Editing Track (following the earlier success of a language editing diploma); (4) Teaching Track (including a special track for those who already hold a Teacher's Certificate). The Department also offers a minor course in Jewish Languages and Literatures for the BA, as well as an individually designed programme in Jewish Languages for the MA.

One of the areas in which the department can serve as a model to others is the establishment, over the years, of four research centres operating under its aegis: the Jewish Oral Traditions Research Centre, in operation since 1957, the Centre for the Study of Jewish Languages and Literatures, the Eliezer Ben-Yehuda Centre for the Study of the History of the Hebrew Language, and the Hibshush Foundation for the Advancement of the Instruction of the Traditions of Yemenite Jews. These Centres facilitate staff research activities with additional support, usually raised from outside sources, that the university is unable to provide, and allows the department to offer funding, through research assistantships, to students who would otherwise not have been able to support themselves during their studies. The Evaluation Committee visited one of them, the Jewish Oral Traditions Research Centre, and was very impressed by its achievements.

The Evaluation Committee finds, then, that the internal structure of the department is most satisfactory, with the two major component programmes complementing each other very well, with the various historical periods of the language well-covered on the whole, and with a number of creative tracks designed to

fit different students' needs. The Committee commends the fact that research centres support staff and student research as well as students in need.

The Evaluation Committee **recommends** that one additional tenured position be allocated to the department and that this be in the field of Modern Israeli Hebrew. This would fill a clear lacuna and respond to student demand. Since there is currently no tenured member of academic staff in any of the departments in the School of Language Sciences who is a phonetician or phonologist and in view of the significant investment in the phonetics laboratory (see remarks below), the Evaluation Committee **recommends** that consideration be given to appointing to this additional position a phonetician or phonologist specializing in Israeli Hebrew, whose teaching and research supervision could be of service also outside the confines of the department, especially in the Department of Linguistics. It is important, however, that the current strengths of the department in pre-modern Hebrew be maintained by replacing the expertise of members of staff who are due to retire in the near future.

Content, Structure and Scope of the programme:

Planning and management of the programme of study is the responsibility of the Head of the Department. The Head of Department receives input from the university authorities, from senior and adjunct staff, and from students. A student-teacher committee meets once a year, but suggestions may also be made during informal contacts. When the need arises, the Head of Department appoints a committee of tenured staff to draw up proposals for amendments to the programme. Updates in the programme in Jewish languages are made with the approval of the Department of Hebrew Language and the Centre for the Study of Jewish Languages and Cultures.

The most important changes in course structure during the last few years are connected to the implementation of reforms recommended in the 'Gager report' of 2006. These reforms aim at giving BA students a broader introduction to academic studies through the creation of 'gateway courses' and 'cornerstone courses', common to different departments or open to students from other faculties. At the same time, these reforms have had the effect of bringing the Department of Hebrew Language closer to the Department of Linguistics within the new 'School of Language Sciences'. The courses 'Introduction to Linguistics' and 'Language between man and world'/'Language, society and thought' offered by the School are obligatory for all students in the Hebrew Language Department.

The Evaluation Committee is impressed by the way in which the Department has been able to adapt to the new teaching strategy set out in the Gager report while preserving its high standards and traditional strengths. The department contributes to and participates in the development of gateway courses, and at the same time continues to train its students in dealing with all layers of the Hebrew language in a competent way. Although the process of updating the curriculum is partly done in an informal way, this seems to function well and the Evaluation Committee saw no reason for change in this respect. The communication among the teaching staff, and between them and the students, is good.

Challenges facing the department are twofold. Firstly, the programme of study is geared mostly to students who already have a good knowledge of grammar and vocalization (*niqqud*) when they enter university. The reported scaling down of the teaching of these in Israeli high schools, however, creates a problem for many students, necessitating additional teaching and tutoring. Secondly, there is a growing demand for studies on Modern Israeli Hebrew, which the department is finding

difficult to meet with the current profile of its staff. Dealing with these challenges could mean shrinking the existing programmes and courses, or extending the teaching staff of the department. The Evaluation Committee **recommends** the latter option, as already remarked, through the assignment to the department of an additional tenured position specifically in the field of Modern Israeli Hebrew.

Teaching, Learning and Learning outcomes

The teaching is performed in the form of classes, tutorials in smaller groups and seminars. PhD students and some MA students are also involved in research projects of the research centres of the department. The core methodology is the philological study of selected texts from a wide range of historical periods. Particular types of Hebrew are contextualized within the history of the language and the Hebrew language is contextualized more widely within the Semitic languages. At undergraduate level students gain the philological and analytical skills that equip them to undertake future research in the field. Students in the department are fully satisfied with these methods of instruction.

The fact that in most cases the staff teach in the field of their research expertise contributes to the high quality of teaching. The most effective monitoring of the teaching methods is carried out by informal discussions between staff and students. The university carries out an annual exercise on-line whereby students are requested to evaluate the quality of teaching they receive. It appears, however, that this is less effective and does not result in any systematic feedback.

Students

Admission requirements for the BA in the department are the same as those of the Hebrew University in general: high school graduation with matriculation certificate, a psychometric score determined on a yearly basis, knowledge of English, and an examination in Hebrew for those who did not attend a Hebrew-language high school.

Admission to the MA requires a BA in Hebrew language at one of the Israeli Universities with an average grade of at least 80. Students from other institutions or departments may be admitted on the condition of fulfilling supplementary studies of 12-16 hours of BA classes in Hebrew Language. Requirements for admission to the MA in Jewish languages are analogous.

Admissions to the PhD program require a grade of 90 for the MA research paper and 85 for other requirements for the MA. In addition, the candidate must present two recommendation letters, a CV and a research proposal, and secure the agreement of a senior staff member to supervise the dissertation. Since 2010, the acceptance of doctoral students has been decided by a committee of the School of Language Sciences, which includes members of the department.

The psychometric and matriculation data, as well as the findings of the Evaluation Committee in its meetings with students, demonstrate that the department continues to attract excellent students, most of them from Israel (with one or two exceptions in the doctoral programme).

The dropout rate is not easy to determine as it varies from 27% to -23% (with negative dropout indicating an increase of students in later years of the BA). The effective overall dropout is low; to the extent that it exists, it can be ascribed basically to two factors. Firstly, due to various external circumstances (reserve duty, the necessity to make a living, childbearing), many students do not manage to finish the BA in three years (on the MA level this problem is even more acute, almost no one finishes in two years). This shows up as dropout in the statistics gathered by the

university. Secondly, the level of the studies is very high. The examination on vocalization (*niqqud*), to be passed with a minimum grade of 85, is a notable hurdle, and some students are simply unable to clear it. Another hurdle is the course on Arabic for those who have not studied it before.

The students are very happy with the study programme, which is judged to be well structured especially by the BA students. The learnedness, pedagogical skills, and accessibility of the teaching staff are much admired. There is a good atmosphere and the staff is responsive to suggestions of the students. Complaints are efficiently relayed via the representative of the Students' Organization.

Most graduate students suffer from the lack of financial support for their studies. Many of them work or, if they are retired, have other duties. Although grants are available, as well as possibilities to work as research assistants, this usually is not sufficient.

There seems to be no official outreach towards alumni, although many personal contacts exist between the staff and former students of the department. Also, given the excellent reputation of the department on the international scene in the field of research, the Evaluation Committee is of the opinion that the department would be in a position to recruit a wider range of graduate students from outside Israel.

Academic staff

The department employs six full time tenured senior staff members and one tenured staff member whose contractual teaching duties are split between the department (50%) and the School of Language Sciences (50%). In addition there are nine adjunct scholars and three retired staff members teaching voluntarily. The senior staff have a teaching load of six hours a week, which is lower than the average of eight hours a week for equivalent staff in some of the other Israeli universities.

Five of the adjunct teachers hold a PhD and four an MA degree. The Evaluation Committee understood that the adjunct teachers are employed on the basis of contracts for the duration of one semester and the courses they teach can be cancelled at a very short notice. Many of the adjunct staff whom the Committee met were dissatisfied with their precarious status and the difficulty in finding an academic position they aspire to. We **recommend** that the adjunct staff be given more stable annual contracts.

The members of the department are leading scholars in the field. They provide excellent teaching for the programme at BA, MA and PhD level. The ratio of the teaching staff (tenured and non-tenured) to the students is satisfactory. It should be reiterated, however, that the status of the adjunct teachers is precarious, despite the fact that they play a vital role in the teaching for the curriculum. Also at the time of our visit, we noted that all the younger generation of tenured staff were on sabbatical leave and much of their teaching was being undertaken by retired members of staff. Although the retired staff are all highly distinguished scholars and undoubtedly provide teaching of the highest quality, the Evaluation Committee would like to **recommend** that a more strategic approach be taken by the department regarding the planning of sabbatical leave, so that a critical mass of core tenured staff be available in any one year to undertake teaching for the programme.

The compulsory teaching of Arabic at the BA level is provided by the Department of Middle Eastern Studies. The compulsory BA course in Talmud is taught by the Department of Talmud. The outsourcing of teaching of Arabic and Talmud to other department clearly results in an efficient use of teaching resources,

but these courses are not linguistically orientated. We **recommend**, therefore, that the School of Language Sciences explore a way to provide courses in these subjects that would be more linguistically orientated and so suitable to the disciplinary interest of all students of the School. We **recommend** specifically that consideration be given to bringing together language teachers from across the university into a single unit rather than have them attached to departments of non-linguistic disciplines.

Despite the undisputed excellence of the staff, it is clear that they have not been able to solve fully the problems that the department has been facing over the last few years. These include the decrease in the number of enrolled students. It was not clear to the Evaluation Committee what initiatives the department was taking to address these issues. Although the teachers clearly had a caring relationship with the students, there does not appear to be a systematic provision of tutorial help for weaker students. We **recommend**, therefore, that such a provision be set up and that additional resources be allocated to the department to provide additional teaching for weaker students.

Recruitment policy

Serious budgetary cuts throughout the humanities in recent years have resulted in the reduction of the number of the tenured staff members in the department. A favourable development was the creation of the School of Language Sciences which resulted in collaborations in teaching. Despite the budgetary constraints, some new tenure-track appointments have been made in recent years, thus insuring the continuation of the activities of the department and its programmes, although the numerical level of staffing is lower than it has been at earlier periods in the history of the department. The department does not appear to have attempted to integrate promising young researchers into its staff by applying for Alon and Yad Ha-Nadiv positions. The Evaluation Committee **recommends** that the department consider making such applications in future if suitable candidates are available.

The appointments in the department are the responsibility of the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and the appropriate Faculty committees. The needs for posts are discussed at a departmental forum of senior staff and the decisions are conveyed to the Dean by the Head of department. This seems to the Evaluation Committee to be an effective procedure.

Technical and administrative staff

The administrator who is assigned to the department functions very efficiently in running the administrative machinery. The holder of this position also plays an important role in creating a friendly and positive atmosphere among the students of the department through the solution of administrative or logistic problems relating to their courses. The location of the administrative office distant from the other offices of the department is, however, clearly an inconvenience from the point of view of staff and students of the department. There is no budget supporting computer facilities in staff offices, which is unusual compared to the support given to staff in other leading universities outside of Israel. The Evaluation Committee was shown a phonetics laboratory. This is a valuable technical resource, which has been established with considerable investment. Since, however, there is currently no tenured member of academic staff in any of the departments in the School of Language Sciences who is a phonetician, the laboratory is overseen by a retired member of staff and does not appeared to be used for teaching degree courses. It is the view of the Committee that

the School of Language Sciences and the department of Hebrew and Jewish languages should take this significant investment into account in their future strategic planning and also take into account the importance of maintaining a position in phonetics.

Research

The tenured staff of the department are among the leading researchers in their fields and their research publications are of the highest quality. There are a number of research centres that support research based in the department. The research centres seem to the committee to be an ideal means of integrating a wider range of doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers into the research community of the department and also supply them with much need financial support. Due to the instability of the funding of adjunct teachers, the committee felt, furthermore, that their position could be consolidated somewhat by employing them as researchers in one of the centres. This also would help integrate research active adjunct teachers in the research community of the department. The committee **recommends**, therefore, that these possibilities be explored within the available income accruing from research budget funds.

Some research centre funds were used to support international conferences, which foster contact with academic colleagues in other universities in Israel and abroad, which the Evaluation Committee commends.

There appears to be little financial research support for adjunct staff, e.g. to attend conferences. Although the primary duties of the adjunct staff may be to teach, many of them represent the new generation of researchers. We **recommend**, therefore, that this support be made available to adjunct staff.

Self Evaluation

The self-evaluation process was clearly taken seriously by the department and the self-evaluation document was well written and presented. It expressed clear strategic thinking on a number of points for the future development of the department.

Summary

The Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages is providing an excellent teaching programme and is in the process of adapting successfully to the major structural changes in the Faculty of Humanities as a consequence of the Gager report, notably the creation of the School of Language Sciences. The department is a centre of excellence in research which commands the highest respect on the international scene. The specific recommendations of the Evaluation Committee are as follows:

- 1. The current number of tenured positions should be maintained after the retirement of staff in the next few years and the department should not have to rely upon retired members of staff to teach core components of the curriculum.
- 2. An additional tenured position should be assigned to the department in the field of Israeli Hebrew, in particular in the field of Israeli Hebrew phonology or phonetics.
- 3. Collaboration should be further developed on the level of teaching and research seminars with the Department of Linguistics within the

- framework of the School of Language Sciences, whilst maintaining the philological focus of the department.
- 4. The Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages should plan future recruitments in a strategic way in collaboration with the School of Language Sciences, but the identity of the Hebrew Language programme should be protected.
- 5. The policy of regularly splitting all appointments 50% in the School of Language Sciences and 50% in the department should be discontinued. Rather it should be applied only in selected appointments. It would seem to be appropriate, for example, for an appointment of a Hebrew phonetician or phonologist, whose theoretical knowledge would be of service to students of the whole School, but not for a philologist working on pre-modern layers of written Hebrew.
- 6. The department should make efforts to integrate promising young researchers into its staff by applying for Alon and Yad Ha-Nadiv positions.
- 7. Members of staff specializing in Jewish languages in other departments should be brought into the ambit of the Jewish languages teaching programme of the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Languages, in particular the teaching of Yiddish, Judaeo-Romance, Judaeo-Malayalam, Judaeo-Persian, Jewish neo-Aramaic and pre-modern Judaeo-Arabic.
- 8. The adjunct staff should be given more stable annual contracts.
- 9. Research active adjunct teachers should be given further support by employing them, where possible, as researchers in one of the centres and financing their attendance of conferences.
- 10. A more strategic approach should be taken by the department regarding the planning of sabbatical leave.
- 11. Consideration should be given to bringing together language teachers from across the university into a single unit rather than have them attached to departments of non-linguistic disciplines.
- 12. A more systematic provision of tutorial help for weaker students should be set up and that additional resources be allocated to the department to allow this.
- Given the excellent reputation of the department on the international scene in the field of research, the department should consider recruiting a wider range of graduate students from outside Israel.

Signed by:

Prof. Geoffrey Khan, Chair

Prof. Shmuel Bolozky

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Prof. Jan Joosten Prof. Judith Olszowy-Schlanger