



Committee for the Evaluation of Hebrew Language Programmes

General Report

October 2012

Contents

Chapter 1:

Background2

Chapter 2:

Committee Procedures.....3

Chapter 3:

Evaluation of the Field of Hebrew language studies within the Israeli system of higher education4

Appendix 1 – Letter of Appointment

Chapter 1: 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, Israel¹
- 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:

1. A final report on each of the evaluated departments,
2. 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 study programmes at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in order 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.

The Committee wishes to thank the management of the institutions and the Hebrew Language departments for their self-evaluation reports and for their hospitality towards the Committee during its visits.

This report deals with the committee's general impression of the field of Hebrew language studies within the system of higher education in Israel.

Chapter 3: Evaluation of the field of Hebrew language studies within the Israeli system of higher education

- *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 first department of Hebrew language was established in 1933 in the Hebrew University. 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 to help to revive the culture of the Jewish people in its historical homeland. In the early years of the State of Israel, this was the only university department of Hebrew language. In 1956 a department of Hebrew language was founded in Tel-Aviv University. In the 1960s departments teaching Hebrew language studies were established in Bar-Ilan (1962), Ben-Gurion (1965) and Haifa (1966). In Ben-Gurion and Haifa Hebrew language was initially housed in the same department as Hebrew literature, but the two subjects were subsequently divided into independent departments.

Departmental Curricula

All departments teach Semitic languages that are closely related to Hebrew, such as the other languages of the North-West Semitic subgroup (e.g. Aramaic and Ugaritic) and some also run courses on Arabic and other languages of the Semitic family. Several departments outsource the teaching of Arabic to other departments (Arabic or Middle Eastern Studies). Although this may seem to be efficient in terms of the use of resources, the Evaluation Committee found that such outsourced courses were generally not satisfactory for students of Hebrew language, since they did not have a sufficiently linguistic focus.

The curriculum of the early Department of Hebrew Language at the Hebrew University had a focus on the philological study of Hebrew in its various pre-modern historical periods, which, in general, reflected the research interests of the staff. This served as the model for many of the other departments. Indeed much of the teaching in several of the departments was initially provided by visiting academics from the Hebrew University. In more recent years there has been an increasing focus put on Modern Israeli Hebrew, especially in the newer departments. This is an important development for various reasons. There is increasing demand for courses on the subject of Israeli Hebrew by students. Furthermore, all departments now offer vocational courses at MA level in Modern Hebrew editing, which have played a vital role in bolstering student numbers. These vocational courses clearly have a close relationship with the academic study of Modern Hebrew and, indeed, many students taking the editing courses are attracted into the academic study of Modern Hebrew. The Evaluation Committee found that all departments have now developed their own individual character with successful innovative programmes, and so there is complementarity and diversity across the departments and not duplication.

Administrative Structures

Some taught courses and research conducted in departments of Hebrew language have a natural relationship with theoretical linguistics. It is particularly desirable for there to be collaboration with linguists located in other departments who research Hebrew. In Haifa theoretical linguists and Hebraists are, in fact, housed together in the same department. Effective collaboration where Hebrew language and theoretical linguistics are not housed together can, however, be achieved without the formal merging of departments. Collaboration has been formalized recently in the Hebrew University by placing the Department of Hebrew Language and the Department of Linguistics together in a higher administrative unit known as the School of Language Sciences. This has the advantage of stimulating collaboration with theoretical linguistics without the Department of Hebrew Language losing its philological focus, creating, in effect, a bridge between the two. Total dissolution of administrative boundaries and merging Hebrew language studies with general linguistics or with a multidisciplinary field such as Jewish Studies can have a detrimental effect of reducing the clusters of excellence both in teaching and research that currently exist. The recent structural changes in Tel-Aviv university, in which the department of Hebrew language has been merged into the broader Department of Hebrew Culture, is a development that brings with it certain risks in this respect and every effort must be made to retain the integrity and focus of the Hebrew language programme in this new department.

Departments of Hebrew language also have a natural relationship with the study of other Jewish languages. The main reason for this is that all Jewish languages contain a Hebrew component in their vocabulary, which is of great importance for the history of Hebrew. Further collaboration in this regard is, therefore, desirable.

International Excellence and National Importance of Hebrew Language Studies

The Evaluation Committee would like to draw attention to the fact that all the departments of Hebrew Language in Israeli universities have outstanding reputations as centres of excellence on the international scene. They all contain a wide range of expertise across various different fields of the subject the like of which is not found in any departments outside of Israel. This allows them to provide courses of high quality that cover the whole history of the Hebrew language. Outside of Israel Hebrew language studies are not represented by such clusters of excellence within independent departments, but rather are normally represented by isolated scholars in the field within broader multidisciplinary departments (with various nomenclatures, e.g. Middle Eastern Studies, Near Eastern Studies, Jewish Studies). Many scholars of Hebrew language who are based in universities outside of Israel have, indeed, received training in departments of Hebrew language in Israel. The fact that there is a higher concentration of excellence in the field in Israel than elsewhere is reflected by the fact that in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* the majority of articles are being written by Israeli scholars. It is unlikely that there is such a concentration of world-leading excellence in Israeli universities in other fields. Given this situation and given the fact that the Hebrew language has played and is still playing a vital role in the building of the Israeli nation and its central place in the culture of Israeli citizens, the Evaluation Committee was dismayed to find that most Israeli universities it visited did not regard their departments of Hebrew language as having a special status. Most were, indeed, vulnerable due to the economically driven metrics based on student numbers. We strongly recommend that their integrity be maintained and indeed that they be strengthened in the future by additional teaching positions.

The departments of Hebrew language not only play an important role in consolidating the national identity and culture of the Jewish people but also are performing a vital service in the education of the population of the country whose first language is not Hebrew. The high quality training in Hebrew language studies that this sector of the Israeli population receives in the departments of Hebrew language equips them to find professions and generally to become integrated into Israeli society. This

applies in particular to departments in the University of Haifa in the North and Ben-Gurion University in the Negev, in which a large proportion of the students are from the local Arab population.

The departments of Hebrew language can play an important role also for the general student body of the universities in their role of overseers of courses in Hebrew expression. There is a great need for this both among native Hebrew speakers and also among new immigrants. In some universities this supervisory role already exists, in others the link has not been formalized. It is the view of the Evaluation Committee that the formalization of the link between departments of Hebrew language and university courses in Hebrew expression will be mutually beneficial. The departments are likely to be strengthened and to attract more students. The Committee is aware of the fact that this has resource implications and recommends that such formalization of links be made on condition that the universities allocate the necessary additional resources to ensure that no additional work load be assumed by departmental staff.

Preparedness of Students for University Education

A recurring issue in all university departments of Hebrew language is that most students have been poorly equipped by Israeli high schools in Hebrew grammar and vocalization (*niqqud*). This necessitates intensive remedial teaching of grammatical concepts and vocalization to first year students. The departments are investing considerable resources in this exercise, but there is still a sizeable dropout of students at the end of the first year since they do not manage to attain the high standards, especially in vocalization, that are required by the departments to progress into the second year. The Evaluation Committee propose various ways of tackling this problem. One way of attempting to improve the situation at university level would be to invest further resources in the first year of instruction and increase the number of classes on vocalization. Examinations in vocalization should also carry credits and become an integral part of the course, which is not always the case in the departments. This is likely to be a stimulus for students to strive to achieve more highly. It is the Evaluation Committee's view, however, that the main problem lies in the educational gap between high schools and universities in this field of learning rather than in a weakness in the teaching in the university departments. The Committee is conscious of the fact that its brief is restricted to the assessment of university departments, but it feels moved to comment on the clear inadequacy of the national high school system to prepare students for university education in this respect. Vocalization is an important component of the heritage of the written Hebrew language and it is essential to master it to progress to advanced studies of the language at university level.

Strategic Planning of Staff Appointments

Despite the wealth of expertise in all historical periods and fields of Hebrew across the various university departments, it is clear that no one department can have an expert in every period and field without considerable expansion of staff. Some departments have developed their teaching resources in specific clusters, e.g. Ben-Gurion has a cluster in Biblical and early Post-biblical Hebrew and one in Modern Hebrew pragmatics. This is an effective way of rationalizing limited resources and creating foci of excellence. On a national level, however, there is a danger that this tendency may result in certain fields of Hebrew not having any representation in any university. The Evaluation Committee is particularly concerned that medieval Hebrew and Hebrew phonetics and phonology may be under-represented in future, especially in view of the impending retirement of most scholars in this field who are currently in post. It is the view of the Evaluation Committee that there should be some strategic planning at a national level to ensure that there is some representation of these fields in Israeli universities. The Committee has made its own recommendations for filling posts in these fields in its reports on individual departments.

Doctoral Studies

There appears to be a national problem with regard to the training of doctoral students. This is a particular risk since doctoral students are the new generation of researchers of the field. The Evaluation Committee met large groups of bright promising undergraduate students, but many, in most institutions the majority, of the MA and PhD students were of an older generation who had returned to studies in later life. Only a small proportion of undergraduates appear to have progressed directly into graduate studies. The main reason for this is the paucity of funding opportunities for graduate students within Israel. The Committee recommends that greater national support be given to graduate students. The Committee also felt that the ranks of graduate students could be increased by greater international outreach to recruit graduate students from abroad.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The international excellence in research of the departments should be recognized.
2. There should be recognition of the importance of the departments for the general student body of the universities in their role of overseers of courses in Hebrew expression.
3. Given the national importance of the Hebrew language, as well as the international excellence in research of the departments and their wider importance within the universities, the departments should have a special status in the universities and should maintain their integrity and be further strengthened.
4. Departments should maintain their philological focus while developing close collaboration with related fields, especially theoretical linguistics and Jewish languages.
5. The remedial teaching of grammar and vocalization in the first year of studies should be strengthened with additional resources, due to the lack of adequate training of students in these subjects in their high schools.
6. There should be strategic planning at a national level to ensure that there is comprehensive representation of the various fields of Hebrew language studies across the various Israeli universities.
7. Greater national support should be given to graduate students.
8. There should be greater international outreach to recruit graduate students from abroad.

Signed by:



Prof. Geoffrey Khan, Chair



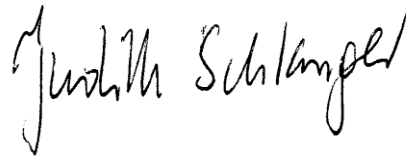
Prof. Shmuel Bolozky



Prof. Jan Joosten



Prof. Aharon Maman



Prof. Judith Olszowy-Schlanger