Committee for the Evaluation of Geography and Environmental Studies Program

General Evaluation Report

September 2012

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Chapter 1: General Background

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) decided to evaluate the study programs in the field of Geography and Environmental Studies during the academic year 2011-2012.

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

- Prof. Patricia Gober, Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan, Canada, and School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning, Arizona State University, USA – Committee Chair.
- Prof. Michael Batty, Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, University College London, United Kingdom.
- Prof. Jeff Dozier, Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA.
- Prof. Baruch Kipnis, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Haifa, Israel.[1]
- Prof. Yochanan Kushnir, Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, Columbia University, USA.[2]
- Prof. Mark Rosentraub, Department of Sports Management, University of Michigan, USA.[3]
- Prof. David Thomas, School of Geography and the Environment, Oxford University, United Kingdom.
- Ms. Daniella Sandler, Coordinator of the Committee on behalf of the CHE.

The scope of work for the committee included:

- Examine the self-evaluation reports submitted by institutions that provide study programs in Geography and Environmental Studies.
- Present the CHE with final reports with findings and recommendations for each of the evaluated academic units and study programs.
- Submit to the CHE a general report regarding the status of the examined field within the Israeli system of higher education and relevant recommendations.

The Committee's letter of appointment is attached as **Appendix 1**.
The first stage of the quality assessment process consisted of self-evaluation, including the preparation of a self-evaluation report by the institutions under review. This process was conducted in accordance with the CHE's guidelines as specified in the document entitled "The Self-Evaluation Process: Recommendations and Guidelines" (October 2008).

[1] In accordance with the CHE's policy, Prof. Baruch Kipnis did not participate in the evaluation of the Geography department in University of Haifa to prevent the appearance of a conflict of interests

[2] In accordance with the CHE's policy, Prof. Yochanan Kushnir did not participate in the evaluation of the Geography department in HUJI to prevent the appearance of a conflict of interests

[3] Prof. Rosentraub was part of the committee in the evaluation of Tel Aviv University and Ben- Gurion University. He was not able to join the committee in the evaluation of Hebrew University, Bar-Ilan University and University of Haifa

Chapter 2: Committee Procedures

Committee members were given an overview of higher education in Israel and a description of the Israeli CHE at their first meeting on March 11, 2012. They also discussed Geography and Environmental Studies Programs in Israel and fundamental issues concerning the committee's quality assessment activity. Committee members had received copies of the departmental reports before this date.
During March 2012 committee members conducted two-day site visits to Tel Aviv and Ben-Gurion Universities. They visited Bar Ilan University, the University of Haifa, and Hebrew University in May 2012.
This report deals with the Geography and Environmental studies in Israel.

Chapter 3: The State of Israeli Geography

Research

- Israeli Departments of Geography and Environment vary in their overall quality, some excellent and internationally recognized for their research activities and some struggling to achieve a balance between teaching and research demands. The latter see an unevenness of activity and a lack of focus to take advantage of their strengths, though they all have pockets of very good research. We recognize that different departments have had different levels of budgetary cuts and retirements, which have exacerbated these problems until quite recently.
- Publication output is consistent with international standards, with faculty in all departments publishing papers in internationally leading journals most appropriate for their respective sub-fields. Average per capita publication rates for faculty are in the 2-3 papers/year range across all departments. We note an additional commitment to publish in Hebrew, and that in relevant human geography areas with a culture that emphasizes books or monographs, faculty contribute to those venues.
- The best, most competitive, research in geography worldwide is commonly collaborative, both in terms of securing peer-reviewed research funding and producing peer-reviewed outputs. There is variable evidence of research collaborations among faculty inside departments, with faculty in other departments, and with international collaborators. However, 'the lone scholar' exists in some departments.
- Compared to international counterparts, most departments garner too little outside funding to support research students, laboratory facilities, and technical staff. There are, however, pockets of success, and some evidence of strong engagement with international funding programs, such as European (FP7, other EU programs) and North American (NSF) sources. Stronger engagement at the international level would benefit geography in Israel as a whole, and opportunities should be created to help early career faculty (who are the future of the discipline in Israel) to do this. We believe that the grant funding from the Israeli Science Foundation in this area should be much enhanced to achieve these aims.
- The total geography faculty in Israel is small, together equivalent to the size of a couple of large departments in Europe or North America. Yet, across the five departments, there is substantial duplication of activity and of research specialties. There is an urgent need for a national dialogue about how to best use the nation's scarce educational resources in geography. The current system of repeating a broad range of specialties across the major universities is inefficient and counter-productive. Given the relatively small size of even the largest departments, the self-evaluations all express too many research specializations. In many cases this results in research redundancies, and insufficient depth or at least insufficient critical mass to be internationally competitive.

- The overall level of interdisciplinary collaboration is not well developed, and the Universities find it hard to respond positively to incentives for it. The great advances in knowledge worldwide are now coming at the edges of disciplines, and Israeli university Geography departments are, for the most part, stuck in the traditional disciplinary mould. Joint appointments are difficult, and there are few incentives for collaborative research and graduate supervision. Importantly, and fortunately, interdisciplinary activity occurs at the grassroots level and is led by junior faculty.
- The research infrastructure for geography is poor in several institutions. Laboratory investment is essential. While Israeli geography departments sit in Faculties of Social Science or Humanities, much geographical research requires funding at levels more akin to natural science departments.

Research recommendations, summary

1. Begin a national dialogue leading to a reduction in research and teaching duplication among institutions and clearly defined specialties at the inter-institution level. This should engage all five geography departments in collective discussion.
2. Develop a strategy for interdisciplinary and collaborative research between and within institutions.
3. Create greater opportunities for early career researchers to develop research profiles and programs: they are the future of Israeli geography and the excellence that exists should be nurtured.
4. Invest in laboratories and computer infrastructure for physical geography, geographical information science, and Remote Sensing.

These measures could create the platform for a stronger international profile, greater external funding success, and a stronger national research base in geography.

Teaching

On all campuses, students were positive about their university learning experiences in geography. A number of themes emerge, however, from the self-evaluations and from meetings with students and faculty that indicate there is scope to reconsider and develop teaching strategies in the discipline. These are spelled out below.

- Programs are sometimes more a set of eclectic courses than a coherent curriculum. There is often an excessive emphasis on knowledge rather than on core disciplinary competencies. There is also evidence that programs have developed without an emphasis on a cumulative curriculum. Year 1 typically involves wide knowledge, with development of specialties from Year 2 onwards, but some courses are introductory even in Year 3.
- Lack of progression and evidence of overlap of courses from year to year are widespread. Further, a lack of differentiation between courses within the BA and MA and between the MA and PhD is common. The distinction between MA and BA education is all the more important because of the proliferation of MA students who

choose a non-thesis track. The need to distinguish between BA and MA courses is all the more critical given the growing dominance of the non-thesis track which is an outcome of the need to close the gap of professional education.

- Too much content is squeezed into too many small one- or two-credit courses. This leads to redundancies, and contributes to the overlaps reported above. Faculty think students are too busy to take on a more rigorous curriculum, but students across the country indicated they are ready to embrace more difficult material and be challenged. It is essential to develop programs that do not play to the lowest common denominator, but which challenge inquiring and able students.
- PhD programs have not kept up with the times. many progressive world universities have moved beyond the idea of a student simply working alone with the major professor, to a situation that involves greater interaction between the student and colleagues and the rest of the faculty. We recommend that all departments develop the physical and social infrastructures to facilitate greater interaction among PhD students. This infrastructure may include office and other spaces for students to gather, coursework organized around problem solving rather than knowledge acquisition, support for published articles and grant submission, workshops that require a high level of interaction among participants, department-wide poster sessions, and group participation in international conferences. Where PhD programs are small, it might be necessary to develop graduate schools that extend across individual departments in an institution, or perhaps between institutions. Securing greater external research funding would help enormously in moving departments in this direction.
- There is widespread acceptance of the importance of GIS (geographic information *systems*) and remote sensing to the discipline, but there needs to be a major national investment in this technology and the facilities to support them if students are to be adequately trained in modern geography. This technology is critical to the integration of geography, but is being taught in crowded classrooms with inadequate software. Emphasis is almost totally on GIS application rather than Geographic Information *Science* (GISc) which now embraces most aspects of quantitative geography
- Many geography programs are small and thus vulnerable to changes in student demand and budgetary forces. The panel was alarmed that this vulnerability is increased by the top-down model of management present in some institutions.
- The problem of small faculty size affects geography's teaching programs where it is difficult for small departments to meet increasingly diverse and sophisticated student programmatic needs. It is vital that students are provided with the educational programs they are promised and are advertised on Websites. Students also require a range of services, including but not limited to, course and career advisement.
- In an effort to buttress enrolments and serve societal needs, Israeli geography programs increasingly have taken responsibility for planning education. While we applaud this initiative, there is concern that a top-notch, internationally competitive planning program requires a faculty size of at least 10 covering a range of

specialties. Without a serious commitment of additional resources, geography programs will need to focus on niche aspects of planning such as desert cities, sustainability, environmental planning, tourism and regional development, or in more physical planning such as urban design.

Teaching recommendations, summary

1. It is universally recognized that excellence in research leads to excellence in teaching stimulating courses. Thus implementation of the research recommendations would have significant benefits for geography teaching programs in Israel.
2. The development of clear learning outcomes for all stages of all programs is essential for improved delivery and an improved reputation for geography programs.
3. Adopt contemporary models of PhD education: students demand, and deserve this, and it is essential for the development of the next generation of geography faculty.

Students

- In several institutions, students perceived that geography was considered an 'inferior' discipline by those in other departments. Yet we met students who had moved into geography from other subjects because of the issues the discipline addresses—its global and Israeli relevance and the core skills. Addressing the program recommendations above at the national level would enhance disciplinary reputation and improve attractiveness to the types and quality of students that faculty wish to teach.
- Few departments could adequately explain trends in student numbers or troubling dropout statistics. In many instances, data in self-assessment reports were contradictory or incomplete. Senior management often did not have these data either. Without complete data, funding does not necessarily flow efficiently or appropriately.
- More courses need to be delivered in English. English is the language of science and increasingly of global business, and it is critical to international outreach. Graduate (MA and PhD) courses should be offered in English. This opens the market to students, and further differentiates undergraduate and graduate programs. The business of global science and the academy is now conducted largely in English.

Student recommendations, summary

1. Develop and implement immediately robust and systematic tracking systems for students and graduates. Student graduation rates and later career success are key metrics for the quality of the instructional program.
2. Consider a process for developing teaching in English, urgently at the graduate level, and potentially over time in undergraduate programs too.

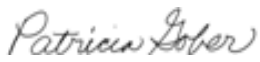
Faculty

- The standard of early career appointments is impressive, across all universities. The current system takes the best and brightest of their own institutions and sends them to international universities for graduate training and postdoctoral research, bringing them back to Israel as agents of change.
- The system is too insular at the local level where BA students stay for MAs and PhDs rather then moving to other universities where their research needs can be better met. There is an unfortunate assumption by many PhD students across Israel that academic jobs will be available for them in Israel. This will work for the top 10%, but not for the others. Realistic expectations must be communicated to the other 90% and new career options opened.
- Departments depend heavily on adjunct faculty for the delivery of programs, and sometimes for contributions to research too. While this is the Israeli model, due consideration should be made to using resources that rely less on adjuncts and more to secure established faculty appointments. Departments, and the surety of the discipline, would grow as a result.
- Faculty carry heavy teaching responsibilities, and this impinges on research. Without research, the discipline could wither and become a service subject, not least because of the small size of departments. A radical overhaul of the Israeli teaching and program model would generate benefits all-round. Other countries have done this, with marked success.

Faculty recommendations, summary

1. Capitalize on excellent young appointments to sustain Israeli geography. Create environments where early career faculty can develop at the same rate as overseas geographers.
2. There are excellent, international standard, faculty in all departments. They need the appropriate environment in which to flourish and sustain the discipline.

Signed by:



Prof. Patricia Gober

Prof. Michael Batty

Prof. Yochanan Kushnir

Prof. Baruch Kipnis

Prof. Jeff Dozier

Prof. David Thomas

Appendix 1: Copy of Letter of Appointment

December 20, 2011

שר החינוך
Minister of Education
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Prof. Patricia Gober
School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning
Arizona State University
USA
School of Public Policy
University of Saskatchewan
Canada

Dear Professor Gober,

The Israeli Council for Higher Education (CHE) strives to ensure the continuing excellence and quality of Israeli higher education through a systematic evaluation process. By engaging upon this mission, the CHE seeks to: enhance and ensure the quality of academic studies, provide the public with information regarding the quality of study programs in institutions of higher education throughout Israel, and ensure the continued integration of the Israeli system of higher education in the international academic arena.

As part of this most important endeavor we reach out to world renowned scientists to help us meet the critical challenges that confront the Israeli higher education by accepting our invitation to participate in our international evaluation committees. This process represents an opportunity to express our common sense of concern and to assess the current and future status of education in the 21st century and beyond. It also establishes a structure for an ongoing consultative process among scientists around the globe on common academic dilemmas and prospects.

I therefore deeply appreciate your willingness to join us in this crucial enterprise.

It is with great pleasure that I hereby appoint you to serve as the chair of the Council for Higher Education's Committee for the Evaluation of Geography and Environmental Studies. The composition of the Committee will be as follows: Prof. Patricia Gober, (Chair), Prof. Michael Batty, Prof. Jeff Dozier, Prof. Baruch Kipnis, Prof. Yochanan Kushnir, Prof. Mark Rosentraub, Prof. David Thomas.

Ms. Marissa Gross will coordinate the Committee's activities.

In your capacity as the chair of the Evaluation Committee, you will be requested to function in accordance with the enclosed appendix.

I wish you much success in your role as chair of this most important committee.

Sincerely,
Gideon Sa'ar
Gideon Sa'ar
Minister of Education,
Chairperson, The Council for Higher Education

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