

**Crisis in Higher Education in Israel**  
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**Summary Notes**

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**Introduction**

The meeting of higher education experts from Israel and the United States was held to discuss the crisis in the Israeli higher education system. The Israeli “crisis” is characterized by a number of issues:

- **Funding:** The Israeli system has been dramatically underfunded, relative to student demand and quality expectations, for a number of years
- **Rapid, largely unregulated growth:** The number of institutions has greatly increased over the last fifteen years, including the development of new sectors of higher education, often with limited centralized planning and regulation
- **Quality:** Concerns have been raised about the quality of education provided in some sectors and in some institutions
- **Access:** Even though the number of institutions has increased as well as the number of students, participation in higher education is likely below adequate levels to meet economic development needs, especially for certain populations, such as immigrant, Arab and ultra-Orthodox students
- **Policy infrastructure and development:** There is minimal capacity for higher education policy analysis and research either in government agencies or in the

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<sup>1</sup> With assistance from Diana Richter and Heidi Whitford

universities. Existing policy centers in Israel currently do not focus on higher education

Presentations were made by a number of the Israeli and American representatives, followed by discussion among the participants.

### **Description of the Problem**

Historically, the Israeli higher education system has received high acclaim for its quality and achievements around the world. Several universities, including Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, and the Technion have strong reputations and are well-respected among academics worldwide. Israeli research is well represented in academic journals. Israeli research expertise, particularly in science and technology disciplines, receives worldwide recognition and has helped spur the development of a robust technology sector in the Israeli economy. Unfortunately, many top Israeli scholars emigrate to institutions outside of Israel, where they can find more support for their research; Israel is now reported to have the highest “brain drain” of any country in the world.

Less is known about the quality of institutions beyond the top tier. The rapid expansion of the Israeli higher education system since the early 1990s has added to the original eight universities a system of new regional colleges, technical colleges, teacher training colleges, and professional colleges. The total number of students has grown from approximately 80,000 in 1990 to over 200,000 today<sup>2</sup>.

Government planning and funding has not kept pace with expansion in the number of colleges or students. Market forces, student demand and local development aspirations have been the primary drivers of the establishment of new colleges throughout the country. A number of factors have been pointed to as the reason for the increased

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<sup>2</sup> These numbers do not include the Open University, which enrolls an additional 40,000 students.

demand for higher education which has helped enable the creation of many of these new institutions. Among them is the fact that many occupations, including those in governmental civil service organizations as well as other non-profit organizations (including hospitals and social service agencies), provide automatic salary increases when the employee obtains a credential.

Some see the role of the Council for Higher Education as providing a buffer between the institutions of higher education and the government, rather than being a proactive and empowered planning organization for higher education in the country. Meeting participants questioned the ability of the Council to both manage the growth of the higher education system, as well as to function as a strong advocate for increased funding or, for example, fulfillment of the recommendations of the Shochat Report<sup>3</sup>.

During the current decade, government funding for higher education in Israel has decreased by more than 20 percent per student even though enrollments have continued to grow. Last year, the Shochat Report recommended a substantial increase in funding, with the majority of the funds to come from government resources and a smaller portion to come from increasing student tuition fees (currently approximately \$2,400 per year). However, the government has not stepped forward to provide the necessary funding. Student and faculty strikes in the last two years have failed to prod the government to come forward with substantially increased funding, and the threat of the presidents of Israeli universities to delay the opening of classes this fall resulted in only a short term budgetary allocation.

Symptoms of the constraints on funding include:

- insufficient facilities, particularly laboratory and research facilities;
- student-faculty ratios that are deemed to be too high to ensure a quality education;

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<sup>3</sup> The Shochat Report refers to the Report of the Committee for the Examination of the System of Higher Education in Israel, commissioned by the Knesset, and chaired by Avraham Shochat.

- an inadequate number of faculty and post-doc openings to retain the best PhD graduates;
- research grants that are inadequate in size to support major research initiatives.

Even though the shortage in funding has been documented by the Shochat Report, acknowledged by the government, and well reported by the media in Israel, there does not appear to be much popular support for addressing the problem (other than within the academy). The general citizenry is not sounding alarms about the crisis with demands for addressing it.

The Israeli participants in the meeting expressed concerns about a number of barriers to improving the system. For example, the student union is extremely powerful and is strongly opposed to any tuition increases; it has the power to shut down the universities (as was demonstrated two years ago). In addition, the existing teaching corps is skewed toward older faculty members, thus restricting entry into the academy for new Ph.D. graduates.

There have been few efforts to conduct in-depth reviews of the Israeli higher education system that examine labor market needs, access of populations, student academic and professional achievement, institutional efficiency and effectiveness. Since Israel is currently a candidate under review (in accession status) for membership in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), this is an opportune time to request that OECD undertake a comprehensive review of Israel's higher education system. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the Israeli system in comparison to those in other countries could help in determining how the Israeli system can be improved as well as build support for implementing those improvements.

Research, which has historically been seen as a strength of the Israeli universities, is also threatened. The Israel Science Foundation, with a budget of approximately \$70 million annually, is smaller on a proportional basis than other major countries (such as the U.S. and Germany) with well-established higher education systems. Many of the research grants that are funded are very small and do not provide enough support for large scale

science and technology research projects. The Shochat Report recommended a doubling of the Israel Science Foundation budget (which funds humanities and social sciences as well) over five years, but there appears to be little movement toward this goal.

A final important political context that was discussed is the fact that Israel will likely have a new government within the next six months. This provides some barriers to any short-term efforts to deal with the crisis, and also introduces more uncertainty regarding governmental support for the system over the longer term.

### **Possible Actions**

The Israeli and American participants in the meeting discussed a number of possible actions that could be taken to help promote attention to the crisis in the Israeli higher education system and eventually lead to actions to help strengthen it. These actions include:

- Survey or poll the general population in Israel to explore people's values and priorities with respect to higher education. Such data developed over time could inform policy research and government planning.
- Conduct studies to demonstrate the contributions of the Israeli higher education system to economic development and other important aspects of Israeli society (both pecuniary and non-pecuniary). Such studies would incorporate the benefits to individuals as well as benefits to society.
- Prepare a series of review papers laying out options for change in the Israeli system in a number of areas as the basis of beginning a conversation among university leaders, government policymakers, leaders in the business community, and other important constituents. These studies could be conducted by pairing Israeli and U.S. experts. Potential topics include:
  - Alternative policies and programs for student financing in the Israeli higher education system, including options for publicly or privately funded grant and loan programs. Exploration of ways to reward military

service as well as potential future options of non-military “national service.”

- Options for changing institutional governance, autonomy, entrepreneurship, and inter-university cooperation and collaboration.
  - Examining the role of each sector of higher education, including the universities, regional colleges, technical colleges, teacher training colleges, professional colleges, as well as the emerging private for-profit sector, to help understand the contribution each can best make to the Israeli economy and society.
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- Assist Israeli governmental agencies or universities with the development of higher education policy research and analysis capacity, so that there is an ongoing effort to examine the intersection of the Israeli higher education system and Israeli governmental agencies, and how these relationships can be improved.
  - Examine the feasibility of contracting with OECD for a review of the Israeli higher education system in the context of Israel’s needs and aspirations, including comparative analysis with OECD countries.