A decisive blow to higher education

By Ami Volansky

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The economic arrangements bill for 2009 included a proposal to do away with the committee that deals with planning and budgeting for higher education in Israel, and to transfer it in effect to the Education Ministry. Everything is now mixed up and memories are frighteningly short.

In 1973, the authority for higher education planning and budgeting was transferred from the Education Ministry to a committee chosen by the Council for Higher Education. Cabinet ministers and Knesset members from across the political spectrum - including Elimelech Rimalt, Esther Raziel-Naor, Menachem Begin, Shoshana Parsitz, Yigal Allon, Ze'ev Sherf and many others - were interested in warding off the danger of politicization from academia and the sciences, and distancing it from what happens in "popular democracies" and "totalitarian regimes" (as Rimalt phrased it) or from the "imperialist nature" of a government office (as then-justice minister Yaakov Shapira put it).

The government's decision to set up the planning and budgeting committee turned out in later years to have been an impressive achievement. The committee is headed by a renowned professor who is well versed in higher education in both Israel and abroad, and who is elected to the position for a limited term of office. Alongside him on the committee sit four senior academics as well as two public figures. In the past decade, the committee showed how to double the number of students, helped train high-tech workers, supplied the means for training additional doctors (whose numbers are so sorely lacking in hospitals) and employees in other vital fields. It also beefed up the research budgets by 500 percent, established binational foundations for research, created partnerships in research and development in Israel and abroad, helped develop the technology field, encouraged the establishment of research institutes, advanced higher education in peripheral areas - and contributed toward the fact that in the 1990s the higher education system was expanded in
an impressive manner in every respect.

Now the proposal is that all these spoils be put in the hands of the Education Ministry instead of experts from academia. In paradoxical fashion, the more the committee achieved, the more its status and authority were eroded. Public figures in the Knesset demanded the registration of more institutes of higher education, even though there were already 64. In addition, academic freedom suffered at the hands of bills that aimed to curtail it, there was increased pressure to reduce tuition, private institutions demanded that their tuition fees be subsidized by the state, colleges demanded the status of universities, and foreign institutions infiltrated the higher education system in Israel and encouraged a culture of short cuts on the way to getting an academic degree.

The committee faced these burgeoning pressures almost without any public or political support, and this lack of support made it possible to cut about 20 percent of its budget. This terrible blow is being felt today in all spheres of academic life, and the expression par excellence of this is the 40-percent drop in the ratio between the number of senior staff on university faculties and the number of students. Currently it is similar to the ratio in the high schools: 25 students for every senior academic staff member, as opposed to 15 in the 1990s.

Before anyone falls in love with the alternative suggested in the economic arrangements bill, it is worthwhile learning a bit about the complexity involved in administering matters of higher education. This is a field with many sensitivities and contradictions, and tremendous complexities. A decision lacking in responsible perspective is likely to bring about inestimable damage to the future of science. The status of the committee must be not only restored but upgraded. To this end, the committee itself must initiate changes in the budgeting criteria for research and teaching so as to give incentives for good teaching and intensify research activity. It must also increase the transparency of its activities and lead a policy of locating additional sources of funding for higher education.

It is imperative for the Knesset, the government, the institutions of higher education and the Council for Higher Education, under which the committee operates, to close ranks around the committee to make it possible to restore its status and authority as well as give it back the funds that were cut. Without recognition of the fact that stopping the erosion of the status of higher education starts with restoring the committee's status, the academic system will continue to roll down a slippery slope.

The writer is a professor of education at Tel Aviv University and author of a book on higher education policy in Israel between 1952 and 2004.

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