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Israeli universities face a crisis, symposium warms

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month.

Tel Aviv University

The crisis, caused by government cutbacks and a corresponding erosion of academic independence, is so serious that Israel's system of higher education may yet disintegrate, said the organizer of the conference, Ilan Gur-Ze'ev.

The symposium, which attracted about 120 participants from Israel's seven research universities, was titled "Is Higher Education in Israel Headed for Catastrophe?"

In an interview following the conference, Gur-Ze'ev, a

Haifa University professor, said the crisis has demoralized many academics and prompted some to leave the country.

One of the participants, Haifa University mathematician Yair Censor, said a consensus was reached that the crisis may well affect the nation at large.

“There is deep concern for the well-being of the State of Israel if further damage to the seven research universities is caused, and if the government does not immediately allocate funds to strengthen research and education there,” he said in an interview.

Participants also concluded that government efforts to convert the university governance system into “a business-like system” will irreparably erode academic independence on the institutional and personal level, Censor reported.

“This could have dire effects on future achievements of higher education in Israel,” he added.

The freedom and independence Israeli universities enjoy under a 1958 law to manage their own affairs is now threatened, Censor charged.

“The government has gradually clipped the total allocation for [universities] by more than one billion shekels over the past five years, thus severely cutting funding.”

Cutbacks have led to a brain drain of many talented academics, especially scientists, he noted.

Censor attributed the current situation to a nationwide strike by professors in 1994 to protest low salaries.

As a result of the 70-day work stoppage, the government “dispersed” academic labour unions and changed the structure of universities, he said.

“The coerced restructuring continues today by virtue of the attempt to abolish academic tenure and replace it by a system of personal contracts based on differentiation

between institutions, departments, disciplines and individuals.”

Under a “smokescreen” that touts reform, scientific excellence and managerial flexibility, the government is destroying Israel’s academic system, Censor claimed.

Gur-Ze’ev said that if current trends persist, Israeli universities will become “industrialized” and “less free, creative and humanistic-oriented.”

Describing the current situation as untenable, Censor urged politicians not to interfere in university affairs and called on the government to reinstate funding to acceptable levels.

Censor and Gur-Ze’ev both agreed that Diaspora Jewry has a vital role to play.

“Jews from all over the world who cherish Israel, and particularly its scientific edge, should express their total dissatisfaction with the management of our universities to directions where we will lose our brain advantage,” said Censor.

In Gur-Ze’ev’s view, Jews outside Israel can be “a very helpful factor” by supporting the principle of academic autonomy, even by means of financial pressure.

“Academic freedom and intellectual creativity in universities are not only the key to Israel’s techno-scientific and economic future, but also the gate to its democratic future.”

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