

## Expensive private master's programs proliferating at public universities

**Proponents claim higher tuition helps fund university activities but some see creation of upper class of students and lecturers.**

By Asaf Shtull-Trauring

Study programs funded by non-public sources in Israeli universities have doubled during the past six years, a Haaretz inquiry shows. The number of such programs has risen in six years from 26 to 51. The trend runs at variance with a decision reached in 2007 by Israel's Council for Higher Education to withhold recognition of new study programs.

The number of students enrolled in these privately-funded programs has risen from 1,397 in 2006 to more than 2,350 during the last academic year.

The programs in question are masters degree programs for students whose enrollment is not subsidized by the state, and which operate essentially as privatized academic enclaves within the public universities.

Students in these programs pay tuition fees that are considerably higher than those charged for regular public study programs; in exchange for their high tuition payments, students enroll in fast-track programs, and sometimes enjoy lightened course load or admission requirements.

Proponents of these privatized programs hail them as sources of revenue that can be used to confer student scholarships, expand faculties and undertake classroom renovations.

Their detractors contend that such high tuition rates undermine the egalitarian, public character of higher education. The programs, these critics charge, damage universities' academic level, and also create "classes" of lecturers by awarding unusually high wages to some.

The programs first began to appear at the end of the 1980s in business administration. During the last decade, they have expanded considerably and entered other, non-applied fields in the social sciences and humanities.

Today, the programs cover a wide array of academic disciplines, including financial management, politics and government, diplomacy and security, public leadership, Middle East studies, crisis and disaster management, medicine and philosophy.

These programs have expanded rapidly as a response to dramatic public budget allocation cuts in higher education, and also to cutbacks in the sizes of faculties. "The universities have found that these programs serve as a means to raise money," explains Prof. Abraham Yogev, from Tel Aviv University's School of Education. "This is liquid money which promotes budgetary flexibility."

A study published by Yogev and colleagues in 2008 established that structural changes imposed by the government on universities in the preceding decade contributed to the strengthening of the private study programs. Among other things, these changes strengthened each university's executive committee, which is comprised of public figures and businessmen, and weakened each university's senate, which is comprised of leading academics. As a result, Yogev and his colleagues concluded, "the business management character of universities was strengthened ... and this helped establish the non-budgeted study programs."

The rise of these programs was also produced by increased competition with private colleges, which started to pay salaries to academics higher than wage levels set by university collective bargaining agreements.

"It turned out that there are private institutions which can pay a faculty member whose career unfolded in a university," said Prof. Ami Volansky, an expert on higher education from Tel Aviv University's School of Education. "The universities felt as though outstanding faculty members were leaving them, and competition for students increased."

In April 2007, the Council for Higher Education decided to forbid new private programs at public universities, but the programs have continued sprouting like weeds. The biggest increases have been at Tel Aviv University, which went from 11 programs with 810 students in the 2005-06 academic year to 19 programs with 1,250 students today, and at Haifa University, which went from six in 2005-06 to 12 or 14 slated for next year (the exact number hasn't been finalized).

University presidents like the programs for economic reasons: They bolster the schools' shaky finances. Prof. Gila Menahem, who runs TAU's private program in public policy, for instance, said the income earned by the program finances stipends for doctoral students, research assistants and student research projects in the equivalent public program.

Proponents argue that these programs serve public university students in other ways as well: Professors invest time in developing courses for the private programs that they then teach in the public programs, too. But opponents don't buy this claim: They argue that the time professors invest in the private programs comes at the expense of time they would otherwise devote to their public courses.

Another argument is over the private programs' quality. Yogev said that most of them are "serious," but nevertheless voiced a crucial concern that other lecturers echoed: "I've never seen a student in an extra-budgetary [i.e. private] program fail."

His study voiced a similar concern, noting that "there are no specific requirements for graduating, like a final exam or final project, beyond the requirements of the [individual] courses."

Critics say that's no surprise, given how much the private master's programs cost: The cheapest of them charges NIS 37,000, and some cost over NIS 100,000. Masters programs in public universities generally cost about NIS 14,000 per year.

"You don't need to be a great sociologist to know that students who pay twice or thrice as much, and sometimes much more, get treated accordingly," said Prof. Gadi Algazi, the chairman of TAU's history department. Critics also charge that the private programs have easier admission requirements than equivalent public programs.

The Council for Higher Education said it recently launched an in-depth inquiry into the whole issue of private programs. It is not known when the inquiry will conclude.

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