

'The treasury is holding higher education hostage'

Published in the "Haaretz" Israeli newspaper on Wednesday April 30, 2008.
By Ofri Ilani

A few days before the end of his short term as deputy chairman of the Council for Higher Education (CHE), Prof. Itzhak Galnoor warns that Israel's higher educational system is in danger of collapse. He places responsibility for the situation on the Finance Ministry, which in recent years has cut about 20 percent of the budget for higher education. The CHE has responsibility for the accreditation, supervision and budgeting of all institutions of higher education in the country.

"It's a disgraceful policy," Galnoor said in a recent interview to Haaretz. "There are no resources, no laboratories, no equipment. "If the Budget Division [of the treasury] takes responsibility for the cuts in higher education then let it take responsibility. I can't take responsibility for it."

Galnoor says that after he leaves the post he intends to "raise a cry" over the treasury's refusal to restore the budget cuts. "The treasury is holding the return of resources for higher education hostage; it is making their release conditional on 'streamlining.' It is demanding a package deal in which tuition fees will be raised and the money will be returned to the system. But in the present situation it is impossible to increase tuition fees. And since the treasury sees it as a package deal, it is unwilling to restore the budgets that were robbed from the universities," he says.

Galnoor says that the Shochat Committee, which was appointed to examine the crisis in higher education, was supposed to conclude its work in 2007; in 2008, with the introduction of the reforms that it recommended, the budget cuts were to be restored. "It's the end of April 2008 and we're in exactly the same place as last year. There is no sign that the plan is about to be implemented," Galnoor complains.

"Israel is the only developed country that in recent years has cut the budgets for higher education by 20 percent," Galnoor says. "The responsibility falls directly on the Budget Division in the treasury and on the governments that agreed to this disgraceful cutback. It's a disgraceful, irresponsible act."

Galnoor was appointed CHE deputy chairman by Education Minister Yuli Tamir about a year ago. As deputy chair he is the acting head of the council. Galnoor says he accepted the position in order to carry out "a comprehensive reform" in the higher education system, but recently came to realize that this is impossible in the current situation.

"The minister of education came to me and asked me to fill the position," Galnoor said. "I said that I was coming for one overall purpose: to set a policy, for a period of 10 years, that would restore higher education to its former, appropriate place. And I don't see any chance that the significant plans will be implemented in the next two years. The coming period will be one of keeping our heads above water. To survive, somehow. I didn't come to do maintenance on the system. It's better if someone else does that."

Free-for-all

Galnoor enthusiastically supports the implementation of the main points of the Shochat report, which was met by widespread opposition among university teachers and students when it was issued last year. However, he is opposed to the committee's recommendation of the introduction of differential salary to the lecturers, based on the decision of the university president.

"These are things that are decided thoughtlessly, and afterward it's hard to rescind them," Galnoor says. "It won't help to recruit scholars but it will harm excellent scholars who for some reason will not receive additional pay. I was opposed to that, but my opinion was not accepted. Because of the opposition, the decision of the CHE says that we adopt the main points of the Shochat report, but not all of it."

Galnoor also criticizes the academic community for refusing to adopt the Shochat Committee's recommendations. "Instead of creating a united front and seeing the Shochat report as an opportunity, a free-for-all broke out within the academic community," he says. "The senior lecturers went on strike and didn't care about the junior faculty. I tried to create a coalition for the purpose of promoting higher education.

"But what I discovered is that because of an absence of mutual trust it is impossible to bring the universities, the colleges, the senior faculty and the junior faculty to an agreement."

Galnoor, a professor of public administration, will return to teaching at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is currently writing a book about Israel's political system.

When she appointed Galnoor to the CHE last year, Tamir arranged for him to receive a salary for what had been an unpaid position. But the change was delayed and is now being examined by the treasury.

Galnoor rejects claims that his resignation from the post is based on the delay in his salary payments. "This issue is about to be solved," Galnoor said. "It was examined by a treasury committee that is supposed to submit its conclusion within a month. That is definitely not the reason why I'm resigning," he says.

'Galnoor's claims are surprising'

In response, the Finance Ministry issued the following response : "The claims of Prof. Galnoor are surprising, since in the present budget year alone, in accordance with an agreement with the university presidents immediately prior to the start of the academic year, the higher education system was given hundreds of millions of shekels more.

"Moreover, a wage agreement was signed with the senior academic faculty at a cost of over half a billion shekels."

The treasury added: "Prof. Galnoor himself was a member of the Shochat Committee, which determined that the additional budget for the universities would come both

from the state budget and by raising tuition fees.

"In light of Galnoor's words the question arises: Why didn't he act to promote the Shochat recommendations when negotiations were being conducted with the senior faculty, who adamantly refused to discuss the implementation of the recommendations of the report."