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Shutting off the academic oxygen

By Dan Ben-David

In a country that regards history as the events of the last quarter, while the future is the next quarter, who even bothers to connect the dots? When this is the national perspective, it should not be a surprise that there is no vision or strategy to guide us. As a result, the country has been meandering from one quarter to another, from one year to the following one, from one decade to the next. This is the mindset that brought us to where we are today. As for the future, may God help us, since it is not certain we will still be able to help ourselves.

In an increasingly open world, in which competition among developed countries is growing - and is just beginning with the East's awakening giants - Israel will never be able to contend with either the quantities of manpower or the resources available to its competitors. As if this were not enough, we live in a region that is home to more and more shrill voices calling for our annihilation, voices backed up by quantities of resources and people that are far beyond our capacity to match. In both of these realms, so vital for Israel's future, the key to our survival - not to mention prosperity - lies not in quantity but in quality.

The locomotives of quality are the universities. They are where we provide ideas for our current generation and educate those who will lead the country, navigate its economy, strengthen its defense, enrich its culture and disseminate

accumulated knowledge to future generations. Under Israel's current circumstances, simply reaching the frontier of human knowledge is an insufficient goal. The precariousness of our situation mandates that we break through it time and again to maintain our comparative advantage in world markets and in defense. If knowledge is the country's oxygen, then its universities are the primary source of this oxygen.

During its first decades of existence, Israel succeeded in creating - from nothing - an academia of historic proportions. The country's founding fathers had the foresight to plant the roots, nurture them despite very scarce resources, and somehow bring to life what became one of the world's leading academic systems. But then, in midstride, the nation - which had become substantially wealthier - diametrically changed its national priorities. In the latter half of its short life, Israel dispatched its higher education to wither in the wilderness of neglect.

Israel's population grew by two and a half times between 1950 and 1973. During this same period, the number of senior faculty per capita rose by a factor of 12. The sharp change in national priorities that has occurred since is clearly evident in the diagram, which is similar to a silhouette of Mount Matterhorn. Considerable sacrifices enabled us to scale its steep left face. Since the seventies, we have been in a free-fall plummet down the right slope: While the country's population more than doubled, the number of senior faculty positions rose by just 12 percent (31 percent if the colleges are included). The Technion - an institution that we expect to be at the fore of the high-tech revolution - today has just one more faculty position than it did in 1973. In Israel's two flagship universities, the Hebrew University and Tel Aviv, the number of positions fell by 14 percent and 21 percent, respectively. In

per capita terms, the total number of senior faculty positions in Israeli universities today is half what it was in 1973.

An entire generation of exceptional scholars has been stranded on the outside. While in some disciplines, there are other reasons for the academic brain drain, it is no coincidence that the share of Israelis residing at top American universities, rather than here, is unparalleled in its magnitude.

Human excellence is not a luxury on whose survival in the wilderness of neglect we can afford to gamble. Those who shut off this oxygen source can expect severe breathing problems in the future.

The writer teaches economics at Tel Aviv University's Department of Public Policy.

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