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'Centers of Excellence' program only helps the strongest, charge academics

30 such centers planned for universities, but funding sources still unclear.

By Asaf Shtull-Trauring

The plan to establish 30 "centers of excellence" within the universities - the flagship of the government's effort to reverse Israel's brain drain - is now underway: After sifting through proposals from more than 1,200 researchers in Israel and abroad, an independent academic steering committee has awarded grants to the first four centers. But while Israel's academic establishment initially welcomed the plan, the announcement of the four winners has sparked an upsurge in criticism.

The project has a budget of NIS 1.35 billion over six years, or NIS 45 million per research group. Of this, the government, the universities and private donors will each contribute one third. The money will be used, inter alia, to give the centers' researchers grants of hundreds of thousands of shekels a year for their ongoing work, as well as initial grants to buy necessary equipment and set up laboratories (where relevant).

But the first four centers - each of which will comprise 20 to 30 researchers from several different universities, including Israelis working overseas - all focus on cutting-edge scientific research: The topics are cognitive processes, computer science, alternative energy and the molecular basis of human illness (led respectively by researchers from the Weizmann Institute, Tel Aviv University, the Technion and Hebrew University). That has led critics to charge that the program will merely help the strong grow stronger rather than bolstering academia as a whole.

Prof. Joseph Zeira, an economist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who is also a leading member of the alternative panel of experts set up by leaders of the summer's social protest to propose socioeconomic reforms, said this is a poor use of resources: The money is being put into fields that are already thriving instead of being used to bolster fields that are in trouble. Each shekel invested in the latter would do much more to bolster Israeli academia's level overall, he argued.

Dr. Iris Agmon, a lecturer in Middle East studies at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, similarly criticized "the enormous investment in a very few people."

"Why should the system invest enormous capital in those who are so outstanding, and who would continue to be outstanding even with a more modest investment?" she asked.

Prof. Oded Goldreich, a computer scientist from the Weizmann Institute, explained the rationale for this objection in an article published last year: Most of the higher education system - the part responsible for the bulk of both teaching and research - lies at the base of the pyramid, he wrote. Therefore, the quality of the base is what determines the quality of most university activity.

The Council for Higher Education responded that improving the base is indeed important, which is why the bulk of the additional NIS 7.5 billion the government recently agreed to invest in higher education over the next six years will go toward this purpose. But nurturing Israel's excellence in research and making it an attractive place to do research are also important goals, and they are what the centers of excellence are meant to address, the council said.

Agmon, however, countered that the larger reform is also hierarchical: The budgeting formula adopted by the CHE will give more money to outstanding universities than to weaker ones, thereby depriving the latter of the ability to improve.

Even Prof. Ami Volansky - an expert in higher education at Tel Aviv University who supports the centers of excellence program, which he says will inject needed new blood into the system - agreed that the overall reform will favor the strong at the expense of the weak and sharpen the differences among Israel's universities. He predicted that in another 10 years, the two or three universities with the most centers of excellence will become a kind of Israeli Ivy League.

But the CHE countered that the hierarchical model actually gives weaker universities an incentive to "adopt" fields that have been neglected by the stronger schools, so as to become the leader in those fields and thus bolster both their reputations and their funding.

Yet another complaint is that the centers of excellence are being chosen via tender by an external academic steering committee. Zeira argued that this undermines the universities' traditional budgetary autonomy. Moreover, he is convinced that the universities know where the money would best be spent than any outside body could.

Prof. Daniel Gutwein, a historian at the University of Haifa, added that he fears the tender system could eventually be expanded to other parts of the higher education system as well.

But the CHE noted that the university presidents, in addition to a scientific advisory committee, had been asked for their input on what subjects the centers of excellence should focus on, and they approved the topics of the four pilots. Input from both groups also served to choose 18 topics for the next round, which will include the humanities and social sciences as well as the hard sciences, it added.

Another concern - one that is shared by university administrators - is that one-third of the program's budget is due to come from donors, but the universities' donor pool is limited. Combined with the one-third the universities themselves will contribute, this means enormous sums are being transferred from the system as a whole to the top 1 percent, Goldreich charged.

Prof. Rivka Carmi, president of Ben-Gurion University and chairwoman of the council of university presidents, said that while she supports the centers of excellence program, she is also worried about the donor issue. "Everybody has to raise money from a fixed

circle of donors; there are few new donors to the system," she said.

That is not just a concern for the universities, but for the centers of excellence themselves, as they may not be able to sustain themselves once the initial grants run out, she added.

The CHE said it is aware of this problem and is actively seeking new donors. Moreover, it said, the bulk of the universities' contribution is meant to finance the researchers' salaries, and that is also the main purpose of the broader NIS 7.5 billion increase in state funding they are getting over the next six years: It is meant primarily to allow them to hire some 2,000 new researchers, both within and outside the centers of excellence.

A final criticism relates to one of the chief goals of the centers of excellence: reversing the brain drain. Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg, the CHE's chairman, said he expects the centers to lure some 300 outstanding Israeli researchers back from overseas.

But Dr. Esther Serok, who heads the association of junior university faculty, said this risks creating a revolving door: The centers will lure Israelis back from overseas, but promising young researchers who are already here will be forced to go abroad because there will be no jobs for them in Israel. Keeping them here would be much cheaper than trying to bring them back later, she noted.

Dr. Ishak Saporta of Tel Aviv University's business school agreed. What the program effectively tells researchers already in Israel, he said, is "you're not excellent. And you're also stupid for not having stayed overseas - because then, we would have brought you back as outstanding researchers."

The CHE responded that the centers of excellence would also hire outstanding researchers in Israel, including junior faculty.

The Finance Ministry, which helped promote the centers of excellence plan, said it has gotten very positive feedback from academics about the program. "So we conclude that the positions expressed in this article do not reflect the views of the faculty," it said in a statement.

This story is by:

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