

Higher education is losing altitude

Over the last 20 years Israel has turned from a country with one of the highest education systems in the world, to one that's old and shriveled up.

By Ari Shavit

First the good news: The last 20 years have seen a real revolution in higher education in Israel. The number of academic institutions has increased from 21 to 63. The number of Ph.D. candidates has increased from 3,910 to 10,300. The total number of students has gone from 76,000 to 260,000. In a period during which five Israelis won Nobel Prizes, the percentage of Israelis born in a single year studying at universities rose from 23 percent in 1990 to 47 percent in 2010.

Swift, sweeping and unplanned democratization have in a short time made Israel one of the world's leaders in accessibility to higher education and academic studies.

Now the bad news. In 1990 Israel was first in the world in "quality" scientific papers per capita. Today it is fifth and falling. In 1990, more than half the senior academic staff were at their peak age in terms of scientific productivity; less than 45 years old. Today more than half of senior faculty are 55 and over.

In 1990 the lecturer-student ratio was 16:1, today it is 24:1.

In 20 years, Israeli academia has grown much older and shriveled up. Departments that were some of the best in the world have become wastelands, left without a new generation.

The social sciences are in the doldrums, the humanities are inadequate, the exact sciences are in crisis. Higher education, which was a source of strength for Israel, has become its weak point.

Where did we go wrong? We went wrong when we slashed our education budget at a time most of the developed world was increasing theirs. We went wrong again when we gave in to populist pressures and reduced tuition. We went wrong a third time when we let academia manage itself poorly and mortgage a good deal of its resources to pension payments. We erred a fourth time when we let welcome democratization come at the expense of declining excellence and we lost our commitment to academic elitism. We made our fifth mistake when we forgot that everything here - security, the economy and quality of life - derives from our ability to be a power that produces cutting-edge science and excellent-quality higher education.

The outcome of these five mistakes is very serious. Universities that were on the verge of bankruptcy in recent years have had to cut deeply. At Tel Aviv University, for example, faculty positions dropped from around 1,400 to less than 1,000. What made the situation worse was the short-sighted way the slashes were made: Senior faculty who retired were not replaced by younger people, leaving the faculty older and atrophied.

The result was an unprecedented brain drain. Young, vibrant and excellent academia within a decade became old, exhausted and mediocre.

Over the past year, the head of the committee for planning and funding of the Council for Higher Education prepared a plan to rescue higher education. According to Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg's plan, 30 centers of excellence will be established at universities to attract the best and the brightest scientists back to Israel, and places will be found for some 2,000 new, young and promising faculty members.

If the government, the students and the academic institutions all do their parts, we will be able to begin tackling the issues destroying Israeli academia. At a cost of around half a billion shekels in the coming year and NIS 2 billion over the next five years, change can come about.

Is Trajtenberg's plan enough? It may not be. A much more ambitious plan should have been created to give academia a higher jumping-off point. But the Trajtenberg plan is the minimum. If it is not adopted, the crisis in higher education will become irreparable.

The cabinet is to meet today to discuss the budget. Resources are meager and needs are great: security, health, welfare and infrastructure. But the most important proposal of all before the cabinet is the one that calls for the renewal of Israel's academic infrastructure. Heavy is the responsibility that rests with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz and Education Minister Gideon Sa'ar.

If they don't do the right thing today, Israel will no longer have higher education that soars. Like academia, the state, too, will sink into a mire of fruitless mediocrity.