

**LETTER TO THE TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY FACULTY REGARDING THE UNIVERSITIES  
STRIKE - DECEMBER 9, 2007**

Dear All

This is my first contribution to this forum. The discussion is quite interesting, but maybe a bit too sophisticated for the general public and way too restrained.

We are at war with the system represented by the finance ministry boys. We need to focus on winning. For that we need clear aims, plenty of ammunition and a bare knuckle determination.

We need to present our case clearly to the general public, in the sharpest way possible. The war is not only over salary increases, although those are rightly deserved by us and are a main goal. The war is against the destruction of the education system in general and academia in particular. The war is against all those who set out not only to "privatize" the education system but to destroy the elitism of academia. Those who set in motion the "IsraBluff" notion that less is more: less education, fewer and worse paid teachers, fewer class hours, fewer senior and junior staff in universities and less money for research are "more efficient", better and all-in-all more likely to improve results. The march of folly continues with the active or passive support of practically all political parties.

Let's clarify things, for the benefit of the general public. Let's call a spade a spade and fight the notion that a lie repeated enough times becomes truth.

Fact: The Israeli economy is based first and foremost on the Israeli academia. Until a few years ago (before the opening of the colleges), ca. 4000 senior faculty members in this country educated practically all the manpower (except for that of the Russian Aliyah) that brought Israel to the gates of the OECD. In terms of the main engine of growth - high tech - I guess that roughly 80-90% of the computer science, engineering and exact science graduates in this country over the past 30 years were educated by, at most, 1000 faculty members. Indirectly, these faculty members contributed, per head, more than anyone else by far to the wealth and well being of this country. This contribution is now seriously endangered by the actions of the past few governments.

Fact: The standards in academia are very high, as repeatedly indicated by international ratings of Israeli universities. This achievement is a consequence of the policies of all governments until the 1990s, when Reagan-inspired policies started infiltrating the Israeli system. The ideology-driven "reforms" started in the Israeli academia about 7-8 years ago have very little in common with reforms implemented in the truly comparable US university systems.

Fact: Let us compare the Israeli academia with state US universities, ranked internationally in similar places (IHE-SJTU 2007 international rank in parentheses) with HU (64), TAU (100-150), the Technion (100-150) and the Weizmann Institute (100-150). I chose rather randomly four such US universities: Ohio State Univ. (61), Michigan State (80), Arizona State (96) and U. of Georgia (100-150). We can compare the total overall numbers for the seven Israeli universities for 2005, obtained from Vatat's report, with the approximate numbers for these US universities obtained from Wikipedia and the university sites (2006-2007):

|                                         | <b>Israel</b>  | Ohio State | Michigan State | Arizona State | U. Georgia |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|------------|----------------|---------------|------------|
| Operating Budget (million \$/year)      | <b>~ 1,000</b> | 3,700      | 1,800          | 458           | 1,300      |
| Endowment (million \$)                  | <b>700</b>     | 2,200      | 1,630          | 400           | 475        |
| Research (million \$/year)              | <b>~600*</b>   | 652        | 335            | 125           | 159        |
| Total Student body (2005)               | <b>124,430</b> | 60,000     | 44,000         | 64,400        | ~33,000    |
| Undergraduate                           | <b>78,450</b>  | 46,700     | 35,400         | 51,300        | ~25,000    |
| Post Graduate                           | <b>44,630</b>  | 13,300     | 8,600          | 13,100        | ~8,000     |
| Faculty (Total Senior, Junior, Adjunct) | <b>6,300</b>   | 5,200      | 4,500          | 2,800         | 2,900      |

**Fact:** The senior faculty in Israel was reduced from 4200 in 1995 to 4000 in 2005, while the university student body (undergraduate and postgraduate) was increased from 93,360 to 124,430. The postgraduate (MSc, PhD) student body increased from ca. 30,500 to 44,630 students (Vatat statistics). The total annual operating budget of the 7 Israeli universities is about 2/3 that of the U. of Georgia and a ridiculous 1/4 to 1/3 that of Ohio State University. The total research expenditures of all 7 Israeli universities equal that of one university in the top 12 US state universities (Shochat committee report, p. 106). The (\*) for the total research expenditures is quoted from the Shochat report (p. 105) under the "widest definition" of the term. The Israeli government's contribution was no larger than about \$300 million (1400 million NIS) in 2004

**Fact and Conclusion:** Israeli academia performs high grade, top rated teaching and research on the cheap. For example, it teaches and advises about four times the number of students of the U. of Georgia (and 5.5 times the number of postgraduates), with roughly double the manpower and only two thirds of its budget. It teaches and advises double the number of students at Ohio State with almost the same manpower and about a quarter of its operating budget. It is expected to (and does) perform research at a high and worldwide competitive level for a pitiful fraction of the budgets available to its US "competitors". In other words, it works harder and more efficiently than its competitors, on average for about between 1/2 and 2/3s of the pay of the senior staff in a top US state university.

**Fact:** Professors are elitist. And so they should be. We are the last bastion, the ones with the finger in the dyke, who prevent the flood of dumbing-down from drowning our youth and our future. The governments of the past decade have perfected another "IsraBluff" - improve the statistics of "success" by lowering requirements, as can be seen in the increased "success rate" in qualifying for the Bagrut (matriculation) exams. This manipulation may work for the short term in the local puddle, but is clearly exposed when external unbiased comparison studies are run on our hapless children. This make-believe is extended also to the colleges. With all their (truly) blessed contribution to making higher education broadly available to many more candidates, the fact of the matter is that what and at what level is taught in these colleges (and this is a generalization, which may not apply to professional fields such as law) is not the same as in the universities. We should not participate in or agree to this farce. We should remain elitist, increase the academic standards even at the risk of reducing the numbers accepted and in this way become a focus of true excellence.

And now to the lies:

**Lie:** the brain drain is due to a lack of ability to attract "stars" and pay them better (differential pay).

The truth: the brain drain is a direct result of the policy of cutting senior staff positions in the "reform". 800 and more "stars" could have been brought back to Israel and absorbed in the past 6 years if these positions were not cut. Hundreds more could have been absorbed had the growth in tenured positions kept up with the growth in the student body. Based on personal experience, there is absolutely no problem to attract "star" applicants for open positions, at least in my field, in spite of the great temptation to join high tech start-ups. In the past six years, every position advertised in my department attracted at least 6-8 excellent candidates. However, once here, those candidates - as do many of the senior staff – are forced to moonlight in order to have a decent standard of living.

Lie: The senior faculty works a few hours and gets paid much more than the average salary.

The truth: See above. Also, government statistics say otherwise. The parking lots at TAU are full between 8am and 6pm. The vast majority of the parked cars belong to senior and junior faculty. As for the pay, we should be paid according to our real contribution. Each senior faculty member studies at least 20 years to get on the faculty, in order to then be the driving force for the material and intellectual well-being of this country. And note that a full professor of engineering or computer science (after another 10-15 years or so) gets paid less than a recent engineering or computer science graduate who joins a start-up.

Lie: The politicians know what is best for the country in general and academia in particular. A companion lie is that the finance ministry boys know even better.

The truth: These boys may be smart. They may even have good intentions. But they are certainly not wise. The lack of wisdom is evidenced by their total lack of long-term vision and planning (except of course of "reforms" that cut and cut, i.e. destroy in the name of "efficiency" and "market force"). Wise politicians and finance ministry boys would have recognized their mistakes long ago, and would proactively enter into discussions with both the high school teachers and the academic staff to change course and avoid collision. So they do not know better – they simply do not know. Israel's competitiveness, based solely on its academically trained manpower, is being eroded. The facts say so (see G. Rolnik's article, Haaretz, 7.12.07), but the decision makers refuse to be confused with facts.

Lie: Academia is aloof.

The truth: In a sense yes. We are aloof because we refuse to join the dumbing-down race. Through our fight to keep high standards and educate our students according to those standards we do for them, their families' future and the society at large more than anyone else.

And back to the war: There is no point fighting with one hand tied behind the back. We need to state our key contribution to the economy (and therefore the well-being of each and every citizen) and to the intellectual fabric of this country loudly and clearly. The future economic growth, security and intellectual health of this country is not in the hands of various deal-making oligarchs and of the few families for whom the privatization process is just dandy. Let the public not be fooled by the "prosperity" advertised by the politicians and commentators as "proof" that the current policies "work". Since the Israeli version of market-driven policies gained the upper hand in decision-making circles here, the long term growth rate has been anything but stellar, the educational achievements at pre-university levels have plummeted, countries that 10 years ago had half our GDP have overtaken us and the middle class is on a slow ruin course.

More focused - let us make clear to all - politicians, finance ministry boys and the public at large - that we are at war with those who want to simply destroy the academic elite, the true engine of growth and the intellectual capital of this country. We must win. Winning means reversing the "reforms", returning the cut budgets and tenured positions and increasing the salaries of all the teachers and academic staff to fit their true contribution to the economy and intellectual life of this country. Winning means making the educator class one of the most respected segments of society, one that will attract high quality motivated people. Part of the respect will come from high pay, part from tougher standards. If this requires continuing the strike at the cost of losing the semester and the whole year, so be it.

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