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TAU's 'strategy plan' fails to please professors

By Ofri Ilani

Tel Aviv University deans should be assigned personal coaches to help them reach their professional goals within the university, and their ability to reach those goals should be the standard by which the deans are judged, according to a plan created by a team headed by university rector Dan Levitan.

The "strategic outline," which was discussed at the university yesterday at an open meeting organized by the Forum for the Defense of Public Education, is meant to "help the university focus and become more effective both academically and financially," according to its supporters, and ultimately to make TAU one of the 50 leading universities in the world. It is now in 147th place on the list put out by the Times Higher Education Supplement.

The university plans to move up in the rankings by recruiting students and lecturers from around the world, by marketing itself better, increasing the number of extra-budgetary programs, combining libraries and cutting down on administrative posts.

The university's director general and all its deans have approved the plan, which was developed with the assistance of Zeev Rotem, the CEO of the strategy and management consulting firm Rotem Strategy.

The plan, which also recommends combining

several university departments, notes that the university has managed to nearly balance its budget, at the expense of cutting down its departments. After more than six years of extensive budget cuts aimed at overcoming a deficit of more than NIS 150 million, the number of senior faculty members has been cut by about a quarter, down to 1,010, by encouraging early retirement and reducing the number of new hires.

Some of the lecturers have come out against the plan, fearing that combining departments will actually lead to the disappearance of many departments altogether. According to the plan, the university needs to act to "clearly note the units designated for a freeze in their present size and even for reduction."

"There are some recommendations in the outline that we cannot accept," said Prof. Ben Tzion Munitz, who heads the university's senior faculty association. "We demand that the university be returned to its original size, before the cuts of 1,400 staff members. We presented the principles of our position on the matter to the president and the rector, and I hope that they will take it into consideration."

The Forum for the Defense of Public Education, a group of students and lecturers who oppose the budget cuts in higher education, came out against the idea of assigning coaches to the deans.

"The coaches who will be assigned to the deans will actually be people from the administration who operate in every department and hamper its academic freedom," said Roi Bal on behalf of the forum. "The plan essentially aspires to create a situation of more work for fewer people. They say that they can't get rid of departments, so instead of that, they'll dry them out little by little. Combining

departments is actually shutting down departments."

Dr. Sylvie Honigman, one of the heads of the forum, was concerned for the future of the departments slated to be merged. "Instead of supporting the departments, they'll let them ebb and fade, until they disappear."

TAU spokeswoman Orly Fromer pointed out that the plan was still in the outline phase.

"The strategic outline was developed over many months, with the participation of a broad pool of academic faculty members, senior and junior, administrative faculty members and student representatives, and with the participation of the deans of the various departments," she said. "Never has a strategic plan been developed before with this much transparency and with the participation of such a large number of various elements. This is the outline stage only, not that of a plan of action - the stage in which the outline was distributed to all the elements in the university with the intention of getting reactions, suggestions and comments."

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