

News & Views item - January 2007

Symposium at The University of Haifa Warns of Looming Crisis for Israeli Research Universities.
(January 5, 2007)



Symposium organiser Dr Gur Ze'ev

On January 2 Sheldon Kirshner of the *Canadian Jewish Times* reported on a December symposium held at The University of Haifa, one of the seven Israeli research universities, organised by Dr Ilan Gur-Ze'ev of Haifa's Department of Education.

Dr Gur Ze'ev told the the 120 symposium attendees that the crisis, caused by government cutbacks and a corresponding erosion of academic independence, is so serious that Israel's system of higher education may yet disintegrate. And he told Mr Kirshner that if current trends persist, Israeli universities will become "industrialized" and "less free, creative and humanistically-oriented."

He also believes that Jews outside Israel can be "a very helpful factor" by supporting the principle of academic autonomy, even by means of financial pressure. "Academic freedom and intellectual creativity in universities are not only the key to Israel's techno-scientific and economic future, but also the gate to its democratic future."

Below is the transcript of the replies given to a series of question put by Mr Kirshner to Haifa Professor of Mathematics, Yair Censor.

Professor Censor served as the Chairman of the Inter-Senate Committee (ISC) of the [Israeli] Universities for the Protection of Academic Independence from its inception in 2001 until 2005.

SK: What were the main conclusions reached at the symposium?

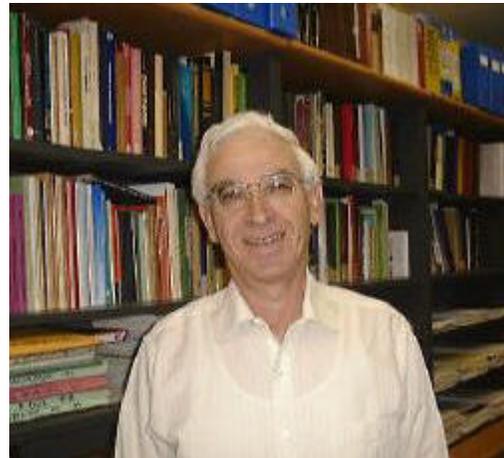
Prof. Censor: Deep concern for the well-being of the State of Israel if further damages to the seven research universities is caused and if the government does not immediately allocate funds to strengthen research and education in these universities.

I am immensely worried that efforts to change the governance system of the seven research universities into a business-like system will irreparably harm the academic independence at all levels: institutional and personal. This could have dire effects on the future achievements of the system of higher education in Israel.

SK: How serious is the crisis in higher education in Israel?

Prof. Censor: The academic independence of the universities in Israel is guaranteed by the Law of the Council for Higher Education (1958), which states: "A recognized institution, *i.e* of higher education, meaning the seven research universities in Israel, is free to manage its academic and administrative affairs, within its budget, as it sees fit".

The freedom and independence that universities have enjoyed for close to 80 years of higher education in Israel brought with them scientific, technological, and cultural progress and enhanced the country's economy, security, and culture as well as the standard of living of its citizens. Recently, this cherished independence has



Professor Yair Censor

come under attack by government decisions.

SK: What are the main problems?

Prof. Censor: The government has gradually clipped the total allocation for the higher education system by more than one billion NIS (New Israeli Shekels, A\$300 million) over the past 5 years, thus, severely cutting the annual total governmental support of approximately 5.5 billion NIS.

The effects of these cuts are seen everywhere in the universities and a trend of brain drainage is already being experienced with many talented scientists leaving the country.

SK: What are the causes?

Prof. Censor: In 1994 the salaries of university professors in Israel were bottom-of-the-barrel low and the academic faculty in all universities conducted a nation-wide strike that lasted over 70 days. It is common knowledge today that, following that strike, an internal ministry of finance committee discussed it and reached conclusions that called for (1) dispersing the academic faculties labour unions, and (2) changing the universities' organizational structure from its current academic-freedom-preserving mode to a business-like organization.

The first rounds in this scheme were the Maltz Committee Report (see:

<http://www.weizmann.ac.il/ISC/issues.html>) and the Grossman Paper.

The coerced restructuring of the universities continues now by attempting to abolish academic tenure and replace it by a system of personal contracts based on differentiation between institutions, between departments and disciplines, and between individuals in the system. These most recent efforts are undertaken via the erection of a governmental Committee, headed by (retired) MK [Member of the Knesset] Mr. Abraham (Beiga) Shochat. There are no representatives from either the academic faculty, or the Students Associations on the committee.

Under a smoke screen of misleading terms such as "reform", "scientific excellence", "managerial flexibility" and the like, this "Reform Committee's" recommendations are predetermined and will lead to the destruction of the academic system in Israel.

SK: Can the status quo be sustained?

Prof. Censor: The academic system of the seven research universities in Israel faces several real problems that call for sincere and deep consideration. These include, but are not limited to, adapting the system to the changing general circumstances in the academic world, preservation of the academic freedom in view of repeated attempts of politicians to influence the system, better management without harming the basic academic principles, etc.

The status quo can be sustained and the system can be uplifted to new heights only if outside non-academic intervention by politicians will be blocked and the funding of the system is returned to its levels prior to the last years' abnormal cuts.

SK: Is the Israeli government doing anything to solve the problem?

Prof. Censor: Not at all! Regrettably, our government even refuses to learn the lessons from elsewhere in the world (e.g., Australia) where such changes were made and have resulted in severe damage to their system.

SK: How can Diaspora Jewry help?

Prof. Censor: Jews from all over the world who cherish the country and particularly the country's scientific edge should contact anyone in the local Israeli system, who they think could help, and express their total dissatisfaction with the steering of our universities to directions where we will lose our brain-advantage.