Israeli Academe's Social Role in the Post–Modern Era: A Case Study of the Open University's "Russia Project"

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Abstract

The academe and its missions have experienced a series of changes and revolutions over the centuries of its existence. Social, economic, political, and technological changes have left their mark on the academe's distinct missions: professional training, promotion of national goals, research, teaching, moral education, and community service. Different missions at different periods of time reflect the dynamics and changing interactions of the academe and its environment. In Israel, despite its young age, the declared missions of the academe have been an object of change: from higher education for its own sake to professional training; from higher education viewed as a goal, to higher education viewed as a means; from education for the sake of education, exploration, and discovery, to technological studies and applied science; from an appreciation of excellence, to equality for all. Despite these changes, community service is one mission that has consistently been an integral part of the landscape of higher education. The instrumental role of higher education in Israel in the progress of Israeli society is planted deep in the history of the Zionist vision. Although it seems that this mission is sometimes forgotten by the Israeli academe, it continues to beat in the heart of the academe, not as a separate strand but rather an integral part of academic activities. In this paper, we present Israel Open University's Russia Project as an exemplar of academic activities in and for the community. The Russia Project is an educational setting that allows any individual entitled under the Law of Return to study in an Open University program at no charge.

Keywords: Mission, Community service, Judaism studies, FSU

Introduction

The modern university was founded on the value of "Lernfreiheit," a German concept that reflects academic freedom ("learning liberty"), and the individual's liberty to study and conduct research according to his own wishes. The German concept, which distinguishes research for research's sake, was quickly adopted and became a standard in the Western world by the mid–twentieth century (Stallmann, 2002).

Over the years, the status of the academe has changed, as have attitudes to its products, based on the role and position of the economy, the nation, and religion in social existence. Initially it was the transition to a capitalism economy, and subsequently to a capitalist society, which had a deep impact on the status and conception of universities. These institutions, which resiliently withstood external events for decades, slowly became a subject of examination and were required to provide an account of their operations. Specifically, interest in the quality of higher education expanded significantly (Worthington, & Hodgson, 2005). The "ivory tower" which was previously free to operate according to its own standards, was now required to define its activities in measurable terms that were amenable to quality control (King, 2007; King, Griffiths, & Williams, 2007).

In the wake of these changes, there has been a growing attempt to define the role of the academe and its quality (Blackmur, 2004; Lieven & Martin, 2006). Quality, in its general form, is a broad concept, which is defined differently by different individuals (Harvey & Knight, 1996). In the context of higher education, its complexity is all the greater due to the presence of numerous stakeholders (Menon, 2003). In their article entitled "Defining

Quality," Harvey and Green (1993) present a broad range of definitions for quality in higher education. According to one of the definitions, quality is the extent to which an academic institution fulfills its declared mission. This definition considers quality to be a subjective issue, which constitutes a product of the degree of congruence between the mission imposed on academic institutions and its realization.

However, in the second half of the twentieth century, a demand arose of the academe to reallocate its resources and participate in technological transfer and knowledge assimilation to meet the needs of modern society (Clark, 1983). The academe was required not merely to create theoretical knowledge, but to apply it to concrete goals, in the form of "organizing knowledge for action" (Baker, 1983, p. 7). After having experienced various transformations affecting the university's tasks over the years of its existence — the teaching model, the teaching–research–service community, the dual research–teaching model — the academic community began to contemplate a return to earlier roles: a combination of teaching, research, and community service (Seaberry & Davis, 1997).

Post–modern society is a "knowledge society" that has made the balance between research and teaching in higher education ever more complicated by adding a third dimension – community service (Austin & Gamson, 1983). In the present, this concept developed into the tripartite model known as the "metropolitan university". Bonner (cited in Seaberry & Davis, 1997) described it as not merely a university located in a city but also of the city, with an obligation to meet the diverse needs of the city's population. In his view, the university is a center of research and intellectual leadership, which uses the city as its laboratory, clinic, and workshop. It offers people of all social classes access to higher education and attends to the community in a manner that allows it to maintain contact with its mission and its conscience.

By bringing the academe closer to the community, this approach shatters the "ivory tower" image that was until recently attributed to research institutions (Schechter, 2006). In contrast to teaching and research, the service element tends to be more vague, and its boundaries more blurred (Boice, 2000; Fear & Sandmann, 1995). Its position is not clear, both on campus and off campus, and it has been likened to "the shortest leg of a three–legged stool (Boyer & Lewis, 1985). Indeed, the indeterminate nature of its mission raises the question of the nature of the community service that the academe should assume. Where does it begin, and where does it end? Does it refer to services on campus, or services off campus? It seems that of all three aspects of the academe's mission, the community service mission is the least comprehensible to academic faculty (Boice, 2000).

Ward (2003) argues that the community service role may be clarified by dividing it into internal and external services. Internal services refer to activities designed to reinforce ties within a disciplinary field, such as participation in conferences and committees, writing reviews for journals, and advising groups of students. Such service activities to the discipline and to the campus are the hidden curriculum of the academe. External services refer to services used by the institution as a means to communicate with the public outside the academe. External services may take various forms, including consulting, teaching, civic and community activities. The common ground of all these aspects is that they occur outside the context of the campus.

In this paper we focus on a unique community service project that is conducted by a university in Israel (the Open University) in the name of broader values that encompass Israeli society   and the Jewish society in the Diaspora.

The Unique Role of the Academe in Israel – Academe in the Service of Society

Israel – the state of the Jews – was established and developed on the basis of the Zionist vision. In his volume "The State of the Jews," Benjamin Zeev Herzl outlined a detailed plan for the establishment of a Jewish state. The entire plan was fundamentally simple – sovereignty would be granted in some territory on earth to provide the justified needs of our nation: "We will take care of all the rest ourselves…" (1978, p. 21). "All the rest" included, among other things, the establishment of higher education institutions. In his detailed vision, Herzl considered the academe as a nation–building instrument, and assigned it a special role in the realization of Zionism.

The Zionist Movement that Herzl led adopted this approach when it gave scientific research a central role in the Zionist revolution. In the First Zionist Congress, Professor Zvi Herman Shapira presented his program, "A Letter to the Future," a discussion on the establishment of a research university in the Land of Israel (Yurtner, 1999). The First Zionist Congress, which convened in 1897 almost fifty years before the establishment of the State, supported an integral connection between the establishment of higher education institutions in Israel and the realization of the Zionist dream. In 1918, at the cornerstone ceremony of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Chaim Weizmann stated, "The Jewish nation was aware that only by developing its spiritual attributes would we be able to realize our material needs" (ibid, p. 51).

The first two academic institutions in Israel (the Technion and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) were established 23 years before the State gained independence. For the pioneers, the establishment of these institutions represented roots in Israel, roots that were designed to blossom into the flowering tree of the State of Israel. The role assigned to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the Zionist Movement may explain the Zionist significance that the pioneers attributed to higher education. More than the universities came to meet the practical needs of the settlement in Israel, they were designed to play a role in the revival of the Jewish spirit and to serve as the focus of the study of Judaism sciences in the national–spiritual center of the Jewish nation (Iram, 1978).

Thinkers such as Weizmann and Buber considered the establishment of the Hebrew University a manifestation of Ehad Ha'am's program: the establishment of a world center of Jewish science and research. Realization of society's economic and political goals, and the educational needs of individuals in the future society were considered subordinate to the major goal of creating a center of science and research in the Humboltdian tradition, in the spirit of Ehad Ha'am.

The history of the Hebrew University largely reflects the sources of higher education in Israel. The institution was established by the Zionist Movement, and served as a symbol of national revival in the Land of Israel. The establishment of the university was accompanied by tension between the research character and the national orientation of the Hebrew University (Hed & Katz, 1978). Ever since the establishment of the institution was envisioned by Jewish circles in the 1870s, it was afflicted with another source of tension between a general Jewish orientation and a Zionist organization, tension between caring for the needs of the Jewish people and caring for the needs of the Jewish settlement in Israel. It has been argued that the Hebrew University was not a catalyst for the national movement, and played no focal role in creating a national culture. Contrasting these arguments is a body of research literature which demonstrates the centrality of national considerations in the election of the circles and individuals known as the "Rishonim". Rather than an expression of a Zionist version of Jewish nationalism, others viewed it as a Jewish institution of higher learning. This dimension was, in the eyes of Jabotinsky and others, an additional motive to establish the institution, in view of the needs of Jewish students in Eastern Europe and their minority status (Lavski, 2005). Weizmann and his supporters believed that reinforcing the Jewish settlement in Israel was a primary motive. This approach was adopted by the majority and became the guiding element in outlining the program to establish the university. This approach found expression in various aspects of the institution, including its efforts to absorb new immigrants from Germany, the language of study, and the physical features of the building. All these placed the institution between east and west, and closely connected to the Jewish settlement in Israel.

Notwithstanding the role assigned to the university in the Zionist vision, it was not taken for granted that the university would conduct itself in the Hebrew language, grounded in Hebrew culture. The establishment of the institution was accompanied by a "language war" – a struggle over the official language of studies (Yiddish, Hebrew, or German), and arguments were heard on all sides regarding the language worthy of being the official language of the academe (Schweid, 1995). Ultimately the battle was decided and Hebrew rather than any other foreign language was designated as the official language. Language is the identifying feature of any national culture. All nations distinguish themselves first and foremost by language, and the Jewish nation's language is Hebrew. Due to the ideological sources on which the Hebrew University was grounded, it has a unique dimension that was a conceptual breakthrough (Yurtner, 1999).

Over the years, academic institutions in Israel, and in the world over, were forced to address their declared missions. Despite (or perhaps because of) its young age, the state of Israel placed higher education high on its priorities. Nonetheless, despite the brief history of Israel's higher education system, its past is replete with fundamental changes that were expressed in changes in the declared goals of the institutions of higher education (Yaoz & Iram, 1987). The history of higher education in Israel is a microcosm of global trends. The academe, which was conceived even before the independence of the state, underwent significant transformations (Davidovitch, & Iram, 2005) from conveying higher education per se, to teaching a vocation; from viewing education as an end, to viewing education as a means; from valuing learning for its own sake and for the sake of general knowledge and discovery, to technological studies of a pragmatic, applicative nature; from learning based on a principle of excellence, to learning whose major value is equality (Schmida, 1987). It has been argued that the Humboldtian model never actually existed in Israel: "We began with the tripartite model: higher education; scientific research; serving the needs of the economy, society, and the state" (Yurtner, 1999, p. 54).

The dynamic nature of the mission of Israel's academe did not undermine the academe's significance in serving Zionism. The university was assigned a role in reviving the Jewish spirit in Israel (Iram, 1978; Davidovitch & Iram, 2005), and promoting science and education, values that were deeply rooted in Jewish heritage. Berl

Katzenelson stated of the Hebrew University (Levinson, 1948) that it was one of the primary tools of realizing the national idea. Chaim Nahman Bialik joined this view when he declared in 1936 that science (developed in the academe) should be the purpose of settlement, in order to enhance and improve life.

The academic institutions that developed after independence continued in the path outlined by the pioneers. In the first years after independence, community service was an agenda in its own right. For example, the Technion focused on agricultural research to help improve the national economy; the Hebrew University operated a Laboratory Corps on campus that contributed to the war effort and also joined the British war effort in WWII. In the 1960s, the Hebrew University began to operate pre–academic preparatory programs in order to reduce sectarian disparities in Israel. Other universities followed suit. In the 1970s, Bar Ilan University accepted new immigrants to the Faculty of Social Work, and the Ben Gurion University of the Negev invested efforts in the social and industrial development of the Negev.

All these activities had a distinct social nature, and represented the academe's community mission. In those years, social action assumed an ideological character that, as noted, stemmed mainly from the history of the development of higher education in Israel. Over time, community service changed from a key priority (as the pioneers viewed it) to an instrument of the institutions' survival, a means to raise funds, and exploit economic opportunities. Programs that were initially conceived as a community service gradually became assimilated into the various disciplines, becoming instruments of fund raising. Preparatory programs, for example, which targeted a specific public (released soldiers of a low–SES Mizrahi background) were transformed into programs that were available to all for a fee. Assistance programs for new immigrants offered by Social Science Faculties, became external programs that were funded by ex–academic sources and became an additional channel for fund raising. The ideology of community service as an activity that was distinct from academic operations became assimilated into the various faculties, and lost its ideological status.

In Israel of the twenty–first century, community service continues in a different form, driven by different motivations. Higher education institutions in Israel operate programs that have a social character mainly as a means for the institutions' economic survival, and they are activated by outside funding that transforms them into an economic endeavor for all intents and purposes.

The Open University's Russia Project – An Empirical Assessment Study (Note 1)

As noted above, community service and the ties between the academe and society in Israel have assumed a new character in the twenty–first century. This previously distinct branch has now become an inherent part of academic practice. The Russia Project is an exemplar of the manner in which academic activities are interwoven into social Zionist activities.

In 1999, the Open University in Israel, the largest academic institution in the country, assumed the task of reinforcing ties between the Jewish Diaspora and Israel. Due to its character and size, this academic institution specializes in developing unique teaching methods for distant learning (study materials, lessons, assignments, exams, guidance, and training are all adapted to remote learning settings).

The Russia Project was developed as a unique learning sequence in Russia for the independent states of the Former Soviet Union (FSU), which allows all Jews (and non–Jews) who are entitled to immigrate to Israel by the Law of Return (1950), to study in Israel's Open University's academic track at no charge. This track primarily focuses on Jewish Heritage and Contemporary Israel Studies. (Note 2) Communications between the University and FSU students (transfer of study materials, checking assignments, guidance) are conducted online and with the assistance of local coordinators in major FSU cities.

One of the major considerations in developing the program in the FSU is the growing cultural assimilation and prevalence of mixed marriages within the Jewish community, and the fact that Jewish and Israeli cultural activities in FSU (conducted by Jewish organizations in Israel and in the Diaspora and by community organizations of FSU Jews) involve only a small proportion of the target population. The majority of this population is not affiliated with the Jewish community, and are not even known to the active members of the Jewish organizations in the FSU.

Contribution of Participation in Open University Studies

A study conducted by one of the authors, in conjunction with the Former Soviet Union (FSU) Office and Education Division of the Jewish Agency demonstrates that this project has, over the decade since its inception, made a significant contribution to learners, on both an individual and national level. Findings of an empirical study show that students reported a significant improvement in their knowledge of Jewish history, the Holocaust, and contemporary Israel as a result of their participation in the program.. The Project significantly reinforced

learners' ties to Israel and Judaism and their desire to attend a higher education institution in Israel. This study indicates the academe's significance in fulfilling community service missions and underlines that community service benefits society even in conjunction with other actions.

The contribution of the Open University Russia Project was assessed on five dimensions, divided into individual and national levels. Notably, this assessment focuses on current students (who participated in the project in the 2007–2008 academic year and are enrolled for studies in the 2008–2009 academic year).

1.   The Individual Level

(1)   Acquiring knowledge (subjective assessment)

The contribution of participation in the Russian Project may be assessed in terms of knowledge, based on a comparison of students' knowledge before embarking on the Open University courses, and their knowledge of topics related to Judaism and Israel at the time of their final examination, based on their own subjective assessment. This is an-individual level contribution but it cannot be detached from the Project's contribution to national goals. Findings show that the vast majority of participants had very little or no knowledge of Israel and Judaism before they entered the Russia Project.

Among young learners, up to the age of 29, we found that 52% had very little knowledge or no knowledge of Jewish history; 75% had little or no knowledge of the Holocaust, and 83% had little or no knowledge of contemporary Israel before they joined the Russia Project. The findings show that more than one–half of the participants who stated that they had no or little knowledge before joining the project, stated that they gained considerable or extensive knowledge during their Open University studies. This improvement in knowledge is prominent especially in the areas of Jewish history, the Holocaust, contemporary Israel, and Jewish tradition. In these areas, 70% or more of the participants (including a high percentage of participants from southern Caucasus and Asia) with originally little or no knowledge reported a significant increase in knowledge. Acquisition of knowledge by students in Russia in the field of Jewish philosophy was also significant and was much greater than the increase in knowledge in this area by students in the other geographical areas of the program.

Students up to age 29 who entered the program with little or no knowledge in the areas noted above, stated that they acquired considered or much knowledge in Jewish history (78.6%), Jewish tradition (70.2%), Jewish philosophy (45.3%), Jewish literature (48.0%), the Holocaust (69.7%), contemporary Israel (68.7%) and contemporary Israeli literature (46.1%). The young learners' sense of the extent of knowledge they acquired in their studies is very impressive in view of the fact that students aged 29 or younger has fewer years of participation in the program compared to the average number of years of participation.   60% of all students had attended the program for a maximum of two years, while 72% of the students aged 29 or younger had attended the program for a maximum of two years.

Notably, students' assessment of extensive acquisition of knowledge increases with their length of participation (Jewish history r = .20; Jewish tradition r = .20, and contemporary Israeli literature r = .21). It also emerges that students who plan to complete an academic degree within the program stated that acquisition of new knowledge was greater than other students.

2.   The National Level

Contribution of participation to national–Zionist goals.

Beyond reinforcing participants' knowledge of Judaism and Israel, the project's national–level contributions can be assessed on the following dimensions: (a) stronger ties to Judaism and Israel; (b) increased willingness to emigrate to Israel; (c) increased willingness to attend a higher education institution in Israel.

a. Stronger ties to Judaism and Israel

Findings show that program participants believe that participation in the program strongly reinforced their desire to learn more about Jewish history (63%) and about Israel (55%). A more limited, yet significant, contribution was also evidenced in   students' desire to learn more about Judaism (47%) and about the Holocaust (46%). 42%–43% of the participants reported that their affinity to Jewish tradition grew stronger as did their desire to join local activities of the Jewish community. Participation in the program contributed less strongly to participants' desire to study in Israel (34%) or to emigrate to Israel (25%). From a geographical perspective, participants from western FSU countries, especially Latvia and Belarus, reported a relatively low contribution in all areas. 45% of the participants age 29 or younger reported that participation in the Open University program greatly strengthened their desire to attend school in Israel, compared to 34% of all program participants.

b. Increased willingness to emigrate to Israel

Of all project participants, only 12.8% strongly agree that all Jews should immigrate to Israel. In fact, 69% of all current students have no intention of emigrating to Israel.

This was especially prominent among the long–standing program participants in Russia, Latvia and Belarus, and less so among participants from the Ukraine, Southern Caucasus, and Asia. However, 25.4% of the longstanding project participants reported that program participation significantly increased their desire to emigrate to Israel.

c. <u>Increased willingness to attend a higher education institution in Israel</u>

Despite their limited desire to move to Israel (31% of the participants intend to move to Israel within four years), participants' showed a stronger interest in attending higher education in Israel: 60% of the longstanding participants are definitely or somewhat interested in attending higher education in Israel.

Summary and Conclusions

In the present study we argued that the mission of the academe in the post–modern era has become an integral part of disciplinary practice. While in the past community service was a mission that took place outside disciplinary practice, today, community service has become an integral part of disciplinary work. The case study presented above demonstrates how community service and academic practices were closely intertwined to realize community goals which, in this case, also include goals related to Zionism.

Assessment study findings indicate that, concurrently with its academic goals, the Open University's Russian Program offers a significant contribution to national goals. This contribution is especially strong in the area of knowledge about the Jewish people and the land of Israel. The target population had limited prior knowledge in these areas, according to the self–reports of program participants. The significant knowledge they acquired reinforces their ties to the Jewish people and the land of Israel. Even if the project's short–term contribution to immigration is relatively limited, it is clear from the analysis of the findings, that the program has an indirect impact on immigration, through participants' increased desire to attend higher education institutions in Israel.

This program initially was conceived as an answer to the needs of the older Jewish population in the FSU who wished to strengthen their ties to their cultural roots. Over the years, it became a point of attraction for younger adults under age 29 who participate in the program while attending another academic program or holding a job. This target audience of the Zionist Movement, many of whom do not meet the halakhic criteria of belonging to Judaism, demonstrate a significant sense of belonging to the Jewish people which is reflected in their participation in the program, among other things. Encouraging this sense of belonging through the project could lead to long–term results, including desired demographic and cultural changes, reinforcement of Jewish communities in the Diaspora, reinforced ties with Israel, including immigration, which is at the core of the Zionist ideology. The Open University's Russia Project is an example of the academe's potential to affect the proximal and distant community. The program is also a testament to the new manner in which the academe fills its third role in the post–modern era by assimilating community service and contribution in its disciplinary practice, and transforming such service into an integral part of various areas of knowledge.

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Notes

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Note 2. The courses offered in this track include: Introduction to Bible, Introduction to Talmud, Law and Philosophy in the Rambam's Texts, Jerusalem Along the Ages, From Exile to Independence, Jews in the Roman

Empire, The Ashkenaz Hassidic Movement, Jews and Christians, Jews in an Era of Change, Ethiopia: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, Chapters in the History and Culture of the Jews of Eastern Europe, Zion and Zionism: The History of the Zionist Movement 1881–1914, Hebrew Stories in the Early 20th Century, From National Homeland to Preparations for Statehood: The Jewish Settlement between Two World Wars, The Holocaust; Israel's First Decade (Part A – Development of Democracy in Israel). Additional courses are in various stages of development and production.

Table 1. Contribution of Program Participation in Strengthening Ties to Judaism and Israel (% of "significantly strengthened")

Area	%
My desire to learn more about Jewish history	62.7
My interest in Israel	62.2
My desire to learn more about Israel	55.2
My desire to learn more about Judaism	46.7
My desire to learn more about the Holocaust	45.8
My affinity to Jewish tradition	43.2
My desire to be more active in the Jewish community in my town	41.5
My desire to attend a higher education school in Israel	33.5
My desire to emigrate to Israel	25.4