

Equality and excellence in higher education – Is it possible? *A case of Everyman's University, Israel*

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Abstract. The dilemma of equality versus excellence in education bears conceptual and practical difficulties. It is especially problematic when dealing with higher education. Most of the universities over the world are selective by nature and pursue high academic standards. The more an institution earns a reputation for excellence, the less likely it is to provide equality of opportunities to large segments of the population. The underlying philosophy of Everyman's University (EU), the Open University of Israel, reflects these two dialectical values of equality and excellence. The article analyzes EU's principles and practices in the light of equality-quality relationships.

The equality-excellence dilemma in higher education

The equality-excellence dilemma in education, in general, emanates from an imminent conflict between human desire for social justice and equalization on one hand, and human aspiration for progress and high achievements on the other hand. In striving for attainment of the twin goals of equality and quality there are many problems which confront both policy makers and practitioners. Quite often efforts to enhance or achieve equity are impeded by efforts to enhance or achieve educational excellence and vice versa. Numerous questions can be raised in tackling the problematic equality-quality relationships, such as: How is educational excellence to be defined and by whom? Is the provision of equality expressed by equal goals, equal means, equal outcomes? Are all forms of grouping and streaming inequitous? Will higher academic requirements result in an increased dropout rate and student frustration or will higher standards provide an incentive and motivation for higher achievements on the part of all students? (Passow, 1984).

The equality-excellence dilemma in higher education bears unique conceptual and practical difficulties. The university institution is selective by nature, and its *raison d'être* is the pursuit of high academic achievements and the provision of qualitative education. The more an institution gains a reputation for excellence, the more likely it is to restrict the access to a highly selective group of students. On the other hand, the idea of "lifelong education", advocating

continuing education throughout adult life, seems to be gaining more and more adherents in the last twenty years and challenges the elitistic premises of higher education institutions (Boone et al., 1980).

Adult students, significantly older than the traditional age students, constitute a large and growing segment of the students body of universities and colleges today. There is an ongoing debate in the modern societies whether fitting adults into the academic setting requires a complete transformation of higher education and a reconceptualization of its underlying values (Harrington, 1977; Solomon & Gordon, 1981). It is not a question of lowering the standards, but rather a problem of adjusting the system to the heterogeneous needs of its extended clientele. Moreover, it became obvious that the conventional universities could not accommodate the needs of those, that for a variety of reasons, have no ready access to traditional institutions of higher learning. Such people include: those who have full time jobs and cannot afford a full time course of study, people who live in geographically remote areas, military personnel, etc.

The emergence of distance teaching universities (DTU), such as the Open University (OU) in Britain, and Everyman's University (EU) in Israel, was a partial and alternative answer to the growing demand of university level education for populations which otherwise would be denied the opportunity to continue higher education. The dialectical relations between the two values of equality-excellence have a crucial importance within the DTU framework. In appealing to a large, heterogeneous population, there is a natural temptation to lower and downgrade the entry and the study requirements. But this temptation threatens the academic status of the DTU. Since most of the DTU are relatively new ventures in the academic world, their need to secure a valued position and to be acknowledged by the conventional universities is critical for their survival as accredited universities.

In this paper the underlying philosophy of EU and its practices are examined in the light of equality-quality relationships, as they are reflected in: (1) the admission policy; (2) the design and development of the study materials; (3) the learning-teaching system. Before analyzing these elements, the background of EU's establishment and its educational philosophy are described briefly.

The underlying philosophy of Everyman's University

The creation of the OU in Britain and its remarkable achievements caught the attention of educators in Israel as early as 1972. EU was established in 1974 as a result of an agreement between the Rothschild Foundation and the Government of Israel to set up an open university. EU offered its first courses in October 1976. In the summer of 1980, the Israel Council of Higher Education recognized EU as an institution for Higher Learning and authorized it to

award the Bachelor's Degree. Today EU is firmly established on the educational scene with around 11,000 students and over 150 courses. Traditional universities in Israel and elsewhere readily accept its graduates for advanced graduate study.

The policy makers who initiated EU, planned it to be precisely what its name implies – an educational framework suitable for anyone willing to study, irrespective of his age, background, previous education and place of residence (Everyman's University Prospectus, 1982). The free admission policy came as an answer to the needs for broader access to higher education and for greater equality of opportunities. The underlying philosophy of this policy is based on the presumption that several sectors of the Israeli population were prevented from studying at university level, not because of any lack of academic ability, but because of various circumstances beyond their control. This very basic presumption explains the sole requirement of the prospective students – to prove themselves capable of studying at the high level demanded. In other words, anyone with the desire, self-discipline and ability to learn can enroll. But in order to succeed, the student has to cope with the learning-teaching system standards, and usually it requires an above average motivation in addition to a basic academic ability.

The underlying philosophy of EU portrays the provision of equality of opportunities interwoven with quality requirements. The practices described below illuminate how this dialectical relationship is reflected in reality.

Free access – the admission policy

The free access policy of EU and its flexible learning system attracted various segments of the Israeli population that otherwise would not attend a higher education institution. Some of the background variables of EU's students highlight several special characteristics that distinguish them from students of the traditional universities.

Age

Table 1 presents EU's students distribution by age. The data relates only to students enrolled in the academic track. Around 2,000 additional students study vocational, adult-education and in-service courses.

As can be seen in Table 1, 63% to 69% of EU's student body is over 26. The age breakdown of first degree students in all the other Israeli universities indicates that 72% of the students are under 25 (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 1983). In other words, EU's students are significantly older than their counter-

Table 1. Everyman's students distribution by age – 1983/1984.

Age group	2nd Semester 1983		1st Semester 1983/84		2nd Semester 1984	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Up to 20	992	11	657	8	987	11
21 – 26	2246	25	1958	23	2281	25
27 – 35	2718	31	2586	31	2688	30
36 – 49	2245	25	2532	30	2463	27
50 +	647	7	706	8	633	7
Total	8848		8439		9052	

Note – 1st semester: September through January.

2nd semester: February through June.

parts at conventional universities. The age breakdown of the students in the British OU shows that only 8% are under 25 and about 70% are aged 25–44 (Rumble & Harry, 1982).

The high percentage of older students at EU and OU reflects the provision of a “second chance” to adults who had, at an earlier stage of their life, missed the opportunity to continue their studies. Among those adults there are people who want to study while concurrently continuing in full-time employment; those who live in remote areas or cannot leave their homes; people who live in institutions, such as the handicapped, prisoners, etc.; adults determined to make up for lack of higher education opportunities in the past, because of reasons beyond their control; people who left school without completing the normal minimal qualifications for entry into a conventional university. The latter group is a special beneficiary from EU's free access policy, since otherwise they could not enroll at any other university, in which the minimum entry requirement is a high school matriculation diploma¹.

Previous level of education

EU's students' distribution by previous level of education indicates that 60% to 65% have a high school diploma, i.e., there are 35% to 40% who have insufficient pre-educational qualifications for conventional higher education (President Reports, 1983, 1984). Nicholson (1977) defines those students as “educationally disadvantaged”. The percentage of EU's educationally disadvantaged students resembles the situation in the British OU. Of the students registering in 1978, 34% had insufficient educational qualifications. Interestingly, 4 out of 10 of those students had managed to graduate (McIntosh,

Woodley & Morrison, 1980). In EU, it is too early to derive meaningful conclusions about the success rate of the students not having the standard qualifications for higher education, since the students who have already graduated constitute a relatively small percentage of the total student body. Undoubtedly, it will be an interesting question to examine in the future.

Country of birth

Sepharadi origin students of Asian or African origin constitute a relatively small percentage of the student body in Israeli universities. It is an important social problem within the broader framework of social gaps in Israel. Among first degree students in Israeli universities, the Sepharadi origin students are between 17% to 20% (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 1983). Table 2 presents

Table 2. Everyman's students distribution by country of birth – 1983/84.

	2nd Semester 1983		1st Semester 1983/84		2nd Semester 1984	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Born in Israel (total)	5890	67	5492	65	5967	66
Father born:						
Israel	1245	14	1217	14	1322	15
Asia- Africa	1396	16	1212	14	1447	16
Europe ¹	3143	36	2967	35	3049	34
South America	40	–	26	–	42	–
English speaking countries ²	55	1	48	1	61	1
Born Abroad (total)	2945	33	2946	35	3059	34
Asia- Africa	1032	12	1110	13	1198	13
Europe ¹	1519	17	1477	17	1149	17
South- America	210	2	169	2	190	2
English speaking countries ²	184	2	190	2	172	2

¹ England not included.

² U.S.A., Australia, England, South-Africa.

EU's students' distribution by country of birth. The Israeli born students are also classified according to father's country of birth.

As can be seen in Table 2, the percentage of the students born in Asia-Africa combined with those born in Israel, whose father was born in Asia-Africa, is between 26% to 28%, substantially more than their percentage at other Israeli universities. In this sense EU is narrowing the social gap, making it possible for Israelis whose socio-economic background and limited education has kept them out of the mainstream to catch up with those who had the opportunities to continue their studies after graduating from high school or completing the military service².

Sex

When the OU was established in Britain, Ferguson (1975) predicted that it would become a university for middle class housewives. This prediction did not come to pass neither in OU nor in EU.

EU's students distribution by sex shows that the representation of sexes is fairly balanced: 51% to 53% are women (President Report, 1983). The women's percentage in EU is slightly higher than in the other universities, in which they constitute about 49% (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 1983).

In pursuit of quality – the design and development of distance learning courses

The free access policy of EU represents the provision of equal opportunities to a wide spectrum of the Israeli population. The design and development of the distance learning courses reflects the pursuit of quality, and the insistence upon high academic standards.

When EU was established it was understood that its major initial task is to prove its academic credibility. The aspiration to receive an authorization for granting academic degrees and to be acknowledged by the other universities prompted the creation of quality control mechanisms for course approval and development. Moreover, since from the very outset EU intended to base the academic work upon a nucleus of internal faculty members, its cooperation with outside academicians from other major Israeli universities was crucial to its existence. The cooperative work between internal and external faculty developed collective academic responsibility for the study materials and enhanced constructive criticism.

The central element of EU's teaching is the printed text, which is supplemented by relevant learning aids, such as radio and TV programs, kits of

scientific equipment, maps, slides with compact viewers, minicalculators, electric organs, etc. The texts for each course consist of approximately 700 to 1000 pages, divided into 12 weekly units, each unit requiring 15 to 18 hours of study. The production of a course takes from two to five years.

The design and development of distance learning courses at EU is subject to quite stringent quality control mechanisms, from the very early phase of defining the theme of a course to the final stage of editorial and graphic layout. Once a proposal to create a particular course – in accordance with the master University course development plan – is submitted, it is sent to three to five experts in the appropriate field for their comments and their suggestions. Following the evaluation procedures of the proposal it is examined by an area committee. In the area committee meetings three alternative decisions might be reached: (a) to approve the development of the course; (b) to approve with restrictions, in case there are revisions needed; (c) to reject it. If corrections are requested, the author is advised as how to go about the corrections. Sometimes, reassembling of the committee is needed to discuss the revised proposal.

If the course is approved without restrictions, the area committee submits its decision to the Academic Committee. The Academic Committee is comprised of EU's academic faculty members and professors from all of Israel's universities. On very rare occasions does the Academic Committee refute the Area Committee's decisions. Nevertheless, its members might ask for clarifications and require changes and re-considerations of various elements. The fact that the Academic Committee is comprised of faculty from a broad spectrum of disciplines, and from a wide range of different Israeli universities enables it to perceive the development of a specific course from a commanding view of the total system. It can be especially beneficial when dealing with an interdisciplinary course. If the Academic Committee approves the proposed course, a course team is commissioned to prepare it. Fig. 1 describes the stages of course design and development in EU.

A course can be written by several authors or by one author, but there is always one major counsellor who is responsible for the scope and content of the total course. The comprehensive course team includes all the academics involved in writing the study units and a course coordinator whose task is to regulate the work of the team and to provide a link between the author(s) and the other members and services participating in the course production. Many of the courses are produced by cooperation with, or solely by, outside contracted authors. Whether the writer is an external expert or an internal faculty member, the first draft of a study unit is addressed to the major counsellor of the course and to the course coordinator, who constitute the nuclear course team. If there are not any drastic and significant changes to recommend, it is sent to two to four external and/or internal experts in the appropriate field for evaluation.

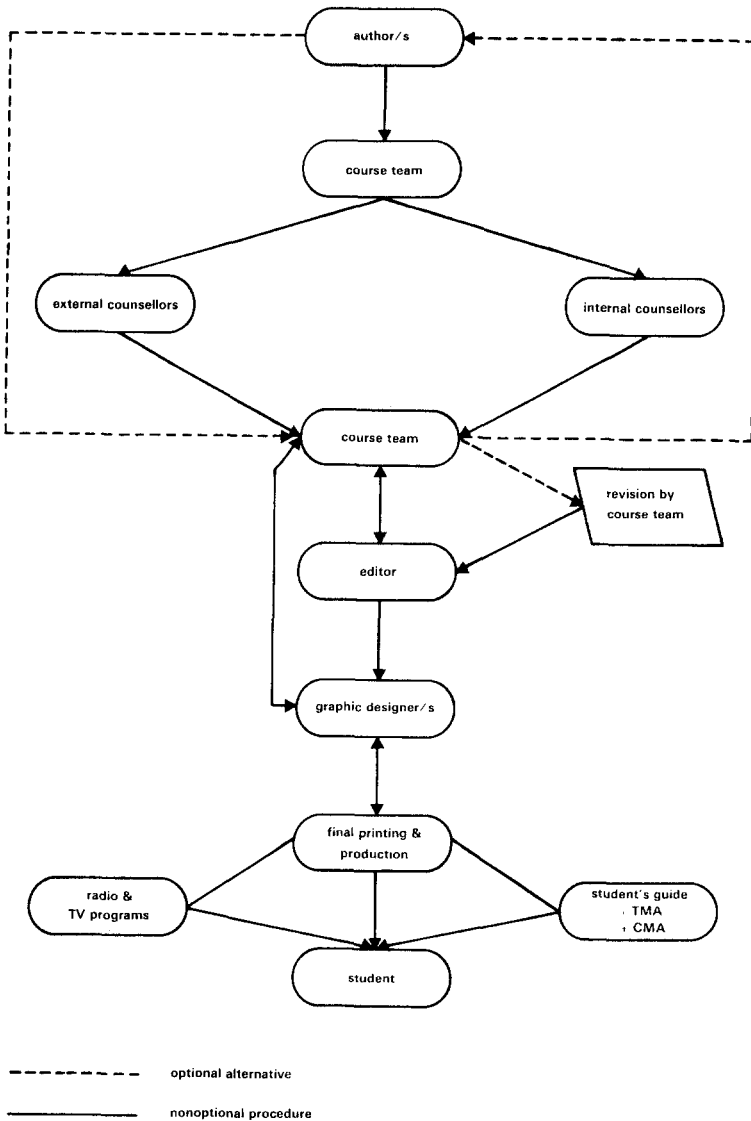


Fig. 1. Course design and development.

The evaluation at this stage purports to make the most out of the opportunity to analyze the content and the instructional quality of the learning materials carefully and critically. In this sense EU, as many other distance teaching universities, contributes to the academic and didactic improvement of university level materials. Although academicians have always encouraged criticism of published research, criticism of teaching has been systematically ignored (Ural, 1982).

When the counsellors' remarks and suggestions reach the nuclear course team, the appropriate modifications are done with the author's collaboration. Sometimes, there are acute occasions in which a unit has to be rewritten by a different author.

The editor and the graphic designer join the course team at the stage when the learning material has passed all academic examinations and has been revised accordingly. The editor and graphic expert work closely together with the course assistant and the author. Meticulous attention is paid to editing and layout designing. The production of the TV and radio programs and other supplementary materials³, and the preparation of the student guide, the instructional assignments and the examinations start at the final stage of setting and printing the study units.

The control mechanisms for developing distance learning courses at EU reflect the efforts to enhance educational excellence. Obviously, these stringent procedures create problems. Many academicians feel reluctant to go through such procedures of inspection and examination. Some even claim that it contradicts the very basic concept of academic freedom, though the purpose of the evaluation is to invite constructive criticism. It is difficult to recruit outside contributors for writing courses. But there is no question about the contribution of collective academic brainstorming and collaborative team work to high quality products.

The learning-teaching system

EU's learning-teaching system is flexible. It is based mainly on the self-study method, enabling students to learn wherever and whenever it is convenient for them. Nevertheless, they have to meet the requirements and deadlines of various assignments and the final examination. The student's need to organize his/her study environment and to schedule the learning activities requires self-discipline and high motivation in addition to academic abilities. EU provides various facilities and offers a support system to consult and assist students in their course of study. Fig. 2 describes the main components of EU's learning-teaching system.

As can be seen in Fig. 2 the printed course materials are the main medium of EU's learning system. The purpose of the written text is three fold: to present the student with source material; to replace the lecture, guiding the student to examine various approaches critically and analytically; and to encourage the student to think in an independent manner by means of well designed questions and learning tasks within the text.

Tutors constitute another important element of EU's learning system. They are mediators between the student and the system. Students may contact their

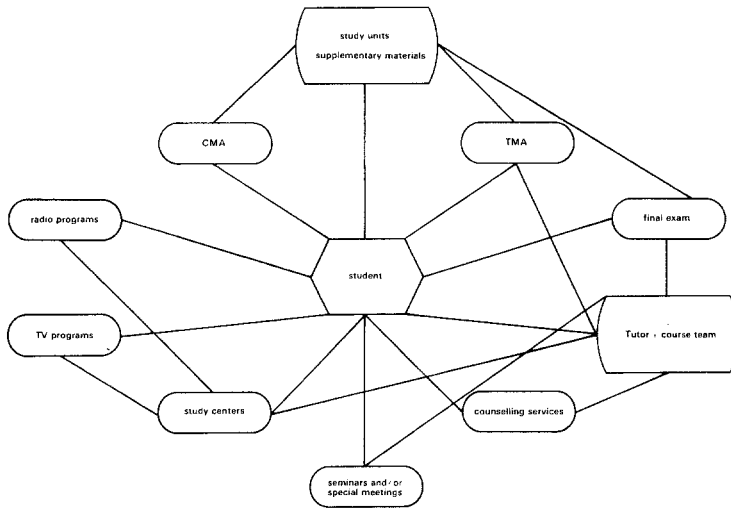


Fig. 2. Components of the learning system in Everyman's University.

tutor by phone at certain hours each week to clarify difficult points, or simply to develop a more personal relationship contact. There is also one monthly face-to-face meeting, in which problematic topics are discussed. In several courses there are special seminars or study tours. The tutor is also responsible for evaluating and grading the written assignments.

During each course students are required to complete seven to ten assignments: computer marked assignments (CMA) and tutor marked assignments (TMA), which are returned with comments by the tutors.

More than 30 study centers with library and laboratory facilities are located throughout the country. Students may go there to view video-tapes of TV programs, listen to radio programs they might have missed, and meet with fellow students to discuss their work. The group meetings with tutors are also held at the study centers.

A special counselling support system was established recently to assist especially new students to adjust themselves to the system and to help them to refresh or acquire study habits required by a self-study setting. In addition to the tutors and to the counsellors, the student may contact the central course team when confronting problems or willing to clarify various issues.

At the conclusion of each course a final examination takes place at the various study centers under the supervision of proctors. The grade and credit awarded are determined by the student's overall performance in both assignments and examination.

EU's study system combines the both values of equality and quality. Its flexibility addresses the heterogeneous needs and characteristics of the student population, providing many means of assistance. But at the same time, the stu-

dents are required to prove themselves capable of coping with the high learning standards.

Conclusions and implications

The case of EU portrays the possibility of combining the two dialectical equality-quality values at a university level institution. The free access policy and the flexible instructional system open up the gates of higher education for many, who for a variety of reasons have no ready access to traditional universities, and/or prefer to study in a distance teaching system. EU, as many other distance teaching universities (DTU), provides an answer to the growing demand of lifelong education. Adult continuing education is expected to have a major role in today's society. Higher education is likely to assist adults in gaining the knowledge and skills needed to adjust to various roles in the contemporary changing world, as well as to fulfill esteem and general education aspirations of many individuals.

Furthermore, since EU is a new educational venture, established specifically for distance learners, it is relatively easy to open new academic avenues for actions within its instructional system, impossible to activate at a conventional university. It has the potential to cater to the needs of a heterogeneous adult population and to expand the significance of education in numerous ways, such as: to enhance independent study, to utilize the potential advantages of various media in conveying knowledge, to extend academic cooperation beyond research to the instructional domain, etc. In many ways, the DTU might be leading pioneers in the academic arena.

Nevertheless, EU is only a partial answer to the lifelong education demand. Though it provides an alternative mode of academic education, which differs in many significant respects from the traditional university teaching, it does not challenge either the rationale or the need for conventional universities. It might be hoped that the strong ties between EU's faculty and scholars of other universities will result in a mutual fruitful benefit, since both may have something to learn from each other.

In presenting the merits of providing equal opportunities in higher education, one should be aware of overlooking the problems it creates. One such critical problem is a high dropout rate, which is a direct result of an open admission policy combined with high study requirements. In the case of EU, it is too early to conclude as to the percentage of the persistent students. There is approximately a 50% dropout rate of beginning students who stop their studies at the first course. A more extensive counselling system might help screening students with unrealistic aspirations as well as assisting others to resume their studies and to adjust to the distance study setting. Obviously, the

problems of screening criteria, the functions of counselling and the dropout rates are interesting dilemmas to be tackled in a future study.

The quality control mechanisms which EU employs for course approval, development and implementation secure high quality distance instruction. In this sense, EU was very careful not to fall into the trap of lowering its study standards, when opening "its gates" to everyone. But quality has its own price. One of its consequences results in the difficulty to recruit outside contributors for writing courses. Many feel reluctant to go through such stringent evaluations procedures, especially when the study units are not considered as academic publications. And the high cost of course production constitutes an additional problem of the long development process and the comprehensive team work.

In spite of the problems emerging from the equality-excellence combination in EU, its uniqueness and contribution to the higher education arena cannot be ignored, nor confined to a peripheral status. It is an interesting educational endeavour, challenging several sacred truisms of the traditional academic world, and providing alternative answers to the lifelong higher education dilemma.

Notes

1. It is important to note that students over 35 can register at an Israeli conventional university without having a high school matriculation diploma, but they are not exempted from the university entry examinations.

2. In this context it is worthy to note that a special program for 600 leaders in Project Renewal revitalization neighborhoods has begun its operation two years ago. It includes intensive preparatory studies in advance of academic courses.

3. In several occasions the media production starts at an earlier stage of the course development.

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