

Israel's Academic About-face

by

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Despite the annual oscillations in rainfall, we know how much water can be expected to fall over a multi-year period – just as we know how to calculate the population's annual growth rate and its rate of consumption. All of this has been known for many years, but we are nonetheless about to dive head first into an empty pool next year. About 15 years ago, the number of vehicles in Israel was roughly half the Western average – but the traffic congestion on Israel's roads was already three times the Western average. It was not too difficult to guess then what would happen to future traffic congestion when living standards here would begin to rise to Western levels and we would buy more cars.

Just like with the water resources, the same neglect occurred in transportation and in many other areas. Time and again, we disregard issues whose default outcomes are painfully clear – only to wake up in overtime, with enormous damage having already been inflicted, and a resultant “no other choice” solution that is often bad, partial, very expensive and wasteful.

Similarly, the approaching storm in higher education is already visible on the horizon. In contrast with the water and transportation problems, this is one problem that will not extend into overtime. When this buzzer goes off, the game will end.

Until the seventies, Israel managed to bring the number of academic research and teaching staff per capita up to American levels. But the sharp about-face that then occurred in Israel did not happen in the States. While the number of research and teaching positions per capita fell by 35 percent in Israel, it rose by 29 percent in America. Even if Israel's non-research colleges are included, there are 40 percent more academic positions per capita today in the States – and this, despite the fact that the number of academic degrees per capita granted in Israel is 13 percent higher than in the U.S.

How did we reach our current state? The ratio of public university budgets to GDP in Israel in 1979 was identical to the American ratio during the subsequent year, 1980. Between then and 2000 (the final year for which American data is available), this ratio rose by 23 percent in the States and it fell by 15 percent in Israel. All told, the ratio of university budgets to GDP in Israel today is 38 percent below what it was in 1977.

After correcting for differences in living standards across countries, Israel's public expenditure per student in higher education was 26 percent below the OECD average in 2004. In fact, this measure – which reflects changes in public expenditure per student relative to changes in GDP per capita – is low not only in comparison with other countries, it is 32 percent lower today than what we spent in 1977.

During 30 years of budgetary neglect and an archaic institutional organization, we did not have the common sense to retain or bring back to Israel's research universities a large bulk of an entire generation's top scientists and researchers. While these were abandoned, the generation that made the country's universities what they are got progressively older. According to data from Israel's Council for Higher Education, the proportion of senior academic staff aged 55 and up in the States is roughly one-third, in Australia it is about one-quarter and in England it is just one-sixth. In Israel, nearly one-half of the entire senior academic staff is aged 55 and up. The

implication: within just one decade, one half of the current senior academics – those who brought Israel to the frontiers of human knowledge and endowed the country with a qualitative advantage in the markets and defense – will be going home. Who will replace them?

There is no lack of individuals with PhDs knocking on the universities' doors, but it is difficult to create, within just ten years, a cohort of excellence at the level that will soon be retiring. The more time elapses, the farther we will need to lower the acceptance bar – with all that this entails regarding a dangerous slide into a mediocrity trap that will be difficult, if not impossible, to extricate ourselves from.

Like in other strategically important realms, the writing that is on the wall could not be any clearer. Is anyone looking?