

## WHY ISRAEL'S UNIVERSITIES ARE BROKE

By Evelyn Gordon, *Jerusalem Post*, May 11, 2008

Originally posted at <http://www.jpost.com/Home/Article.aspx?id=119529>

Writing in *Haaretz* last month, Prof. Eli Podeh of Hebrew University aptly summarized the root of the university funding crisis in three words: “Nobody really cares.” He even correctly attributed this apathy to Israelis’ “negative view of academe.” Yet rather than acknowledging the universities’ own responsibility for this attitude, he blamed it on Israelis’ obsession with “reality television and the pursuit of money”—a theory that unfortunately fails to explain why Americans, equally obsessed with reality television and making money, nevertheless boast the world’s best and wealthiest universities.

When comparing the Israeli and American systems, two facts immediately stand out. First, while Israeli universities are state-funded, America’s best and wealthiest universities are private. Second, annual tuition at top American schools is about 15 times Israel’s NIS 8,600 (\$2,250).

These differences are not coincidental. In societies where money is considered a measure of value, American tuition proclaims higher education valuable, while Israeli tuition labels it virtually worthless. Moreover, while Israel’s system makes higher education another state-funded entitlement, America’s private system makes it a privilege.

Top American schools are therefore attractive to funders, who like the idea of enabling deserving students to obtain a valuable but otherwise unaffordable education. Moreover, since high tuition means that a majority of students receive financial aid, alumni feel obligated to help others as they were helped.

Israeli universities, however, face strong disincentives to giving: Private donors object to funding a government entitlement; most alumni paid “full” tuition, and therefore feel no obligation to help others; and the product, as indicated by its price, is worthless anyway— a point that also argues against generous government funding.

And since, as last week’s column explained, all Western universities must increase their non-state funding to survive, these disincentives put Israeli schools at a serious disadvantage. Hence the importance of raising tuition, as the Shochat Committee recommended last year: In addition to increasing the universities’ revenues in itself, it would encourage private donations by sending the signals necessary to attract them—that higher education is valuable, that it is not a government entitlement for which civil society bears no responsibility, and that many deserving students cannot afford it without help.

Yet for all the importance of this issue, another American-Israeli difference that is less immediately obvious may be even more important. Prof. Israel Bartal, Hebrew University’s dean of the humanities, enunciated this difference

in the Los Angeles-based Jewish Journal last February, when he declared that “trying to shape a generation of Jewish leaders” is “beyond our scope.”

Substitute the appropriate nationality, and that statement would appall most leading non-Israeli schools. England's Oxford and Cambridge, France's *grande ecoles*, America's Harvard, Yale and Princeton—all view producing future leaders as part of their job. That is why France has a *grande ecole* devoted exclusively to public administration, why Harvard's Kennedy School of Government or Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs rank among their respective universities' most prestigious departments, why a school like Princeton unabashedly boasts of “Princeton in the nation's service.”

It is also why American scholars easily move between academia and government—people like Larry Summers (who left Harvard for government service, ultimately became secretary of the treasury, then returned as Harvard's president), Henry Kissinger (who left Harvard to become national security advisor and secretary of state, then returned to Georgetown University) or Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (a former Stanford provost). In Israel, such transitions are exceedingly rare.

The point is not that Israel needs more academics in politics; rather, it is the attitude this trend reflects: While American (or British or French) universities feel a responsibility to give back to the communities that produced them, Israeli universities acknowledge no such responsibility. They view their job strictly as churning out experts in particular academic fields. But if universities feel no obligation toward society, why should society feel any obligation toward the universities?

Israeli universities do not even feel obliged to produce well-rounded citizens with a broad base of knowledge. Except at Bar-Ilan, where students must take some Jewish studies courses, there are no distribution requirements. Thus science majors can graduate without ever taking a humanities or social science course, while humanities majors can graduate without studying any natural or social science.

The result, as Nobel laureate in chemistry Prof. Aharon Ciechanover lamented in *Yedioth Ahronoth* two years ago, is that “even among people with academic degrees, I find garbled language, a lack of cultural depth, and ignorance of general history and the history of the Jewish people. We need institutions of higher learning headed by path-breaking leadership, but that kind of leadership has disappeared.”

Added to all this is rampant academic post-Zionism. Consider some examples: Two lecturers at Ben-Gurion University and its affiliate, Sapir College, refused to teach IDF reservists in uniform; many of their fellows supported them. A Haifa University master's student received top marks for a thesis accusing IDF soldiers of massacring Arabs during the War of Independence, yet the veterans later won a libel suit by proving gross fabrications of the evidence. A Tel Aviv University professor published a book asserting that there is no Jewish people. A Ben-Gurion lecturer described his university, located well

within pre-1967 Israel, as being in “Palestinian territory.” Sociology professors awarded a prize to a Hebrew University graduate student for a paper claiming that IDF soldiers rarely rape Palestinian women because they view Palestinians as subhuman.

Since most Israelis love their country, and willingly defend it when necessary, their “negative view” of an academic establishment that prizes anti-Israel libel over academic rigor and deems military service an offense is easily understandable. When academia actively undermines all that ordinary Israelis hold dear, why should they, or the governments they elect, wish to fund it?

Raising tuition is the government’s job. But only the universities can change their own attitudes, their own relationship with Israeli society. And if they care about their financial future, they must do so—because unless ordinary Israelis are convinced that the universities do contribute to society, and are thus worth funding, the stark truth is that they have no future.