The possibility of enrolling in English-language B.A. or M.A. programs, often at a fraction of the tuition paid abroad, is a draw for foreigners in the first Hebrew city

Judy Maltz

After turning down acceptances to two of America’s top universities, Harvard and Princeton, Alon Van Dam, the son of an Israeli mother and Dutch father, decided to pursue his bachelor’s degree in Israel. “I grew up in the Netherlands, but never felt I fit in there,” he explains.

He started out as an exchange student from a Dutch university at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, but found himself gravitating on weekends toward Tel Aviv, where he notes that “the social life was much more alive.”

Eventually, Van Dam transferred to the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, where he is now enrolled in the government studies program. “What attracted me was the possibility of studying in English, the program itself, which is very serious, and being able to live in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area,” says the 30-year-old.

Although Tel Aviv has many other attributes that attract young internationals, the relative availability of jobs for English-speakers has certainly been a key draw, and most of those flocking to its shores in recent years are either working or looking for work in the tech sector. Yet, not insignificant number of new English-speakers in and around town, like Van Dam, have stepped here because of something else that didn’t exist in Israel until quite recently: the opportunity to study for a degree in their mother tongue—at least, in a language that comes easier to them than Hebrew. Making the deal even sweeter is the fact that tuition rates at these programs are just a fraction of what they cost in the United States (even though they’re significantly higher than the rates paid by Israelis studying in Hebrew).

Herzliya’s IDC—the first institution of higher education in the country to offer full degree programs in English, starting about a decade ago—today has a total of 1,600 students from 86 different countries studying in full-time undergraduate degree programs in communications, government, business and psychology, as well as in its graduate MBA program, according to Jonathan Davis, head of the Raphael Recanati International School. Over the next few years, he adds, the IDC plans to roll out a few more.

Van Dam, who serves as president of the IDC debate society and recently placed second in the European debate championships, might well be considered the “poster child” for this initiative. Tel Aviv, says this second-year student, has exactly the qualities that people tend to associate with Amsterdam, but which Amsterdam, at least in his view as a native son, actually lacks.

“Tel Aviv is actually a city that doesn’t sleep,” he notes. “It’s actually a city that’s tolerant. You can see two guys walking holding hands here and say to yourself: ‘Aren’t they cute?’ While in Amsterdam, you’d say: ‘Wow, they’re holding hands.’

For its part, Tel Aviv University today has 650 students studying in full-time degree programs in English, a new phenomenon for it, and a similar number in one-year study-abroad programs. "This number has grown significantly in recent years," says Maureen Meyer, head of internal programs at the university. “We have noticed that the city of Tel Aviv is a great attraction for potential students looking for a dynamic, interesting and fun experience that will go hand in hand with top-level academic studies.'

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Taj Newman, who is studying for her bachelor’s degree in philosophy and literature, originally comes from Oregon but made her way to TAU via Hebrew University: “I’d been in Jerusalem for about a year but was visiting Tel Aviv intermittently, and had a sense that it would be more fun and freeing to live in Tel Aviv, and it might be easier to meet people there and build a community, so I transferred.”

Jonas Eilerson may not have the typical profile of a Tel Aviv international, but the opportunity to study in English there was also what initially attracted him. Originally from Denmark, the 32-year-old sociologist, who is not Jewish, arrived four years ago to do an MBA at TAU. He eventually stayed on “for love,” as he puts it, marrying his partner, Ben, a local property developer; Eilerson now runs a multinational luxury-tourism company that he set up in Tel Aviv.

“Honestly, if I hadn’t felt the whole entrepreneurial and creative energies that Tel Aviv is so full of, I wouldn’t have dared open this company,” he says.

Asked to explain his attraction to the city, Eilerson absolutely grudgingly: “It is quite simply the most fabulous place and city destination in the world. I am saying this with some weight behind my words, as I’ve lived and worked in Copenhagen, Paris, Berlin, Sydney and London. Don’t get me wrong: Jerusalem is wonderful in its own right, but I’d go nuts if I had to live there.”