An Israeli education for all

More and more international academic programs are being offered in English; local educators say this could solve Israel's PR woes

By Judy Maltz

Thinking about going to graduate school in Israel, but worried your Hebrew is not good enough? That's not a problem anymore. Under the banner of “internationalization,” the new buzzword in global academia, Israeli universities are offering more and more graduate programs exclusively in English, especially designed to attract students from abroad, and even more such programs are in the works.

This year alone, Tel Aviv University opened five new English-language master's degree programs, in archaeology, emergency and disaster management, environmental studies, Jewish studies and a more interdisciplinary political science in action: leadership, communication and elections. Another program in migration studies is slated to open in the fall.

The University of Haifa has just opened English-language master's degree programs in peace and conflict management studies, Holocaust studies, art therapy, patent law and maritime civilizations.

The Hebrew University in Jerusalem opened a new master's program this year in “Glocal Community Development Studies,” which provides hands-on training in impoverished communities around the globe, as well as a Master of Laws program in human rights and international law. And the above is just a sampling.

"The world is a global village, and higher education has gone global," observes Hanan Alexander, head of the international school at the University of Haifa. "This is one of the things that first-rate research universities do these days, and it's no coincidence that we've all reached the same conclusion."

In general, these are one-year programs that span three semesters — fall, spring and summer — and do not require a thesis. Students interested in writing a thesis can stay on an extra semester or write their thesis back home, under the supervision of a qualified academic. The overall trend has been to focus on disciplines in which Israel as a country provides a special advantage (archaeology, Holocaust studies and biblical studies, for example), or in which Israel has gained special expertise (emergency and disaster management and migration studies, for example).

A new master's program in crisis and trauma studies, which opened two years ago at Tel Aviv University, invites students to take advantage of all worlds by studying in "a living laboratory for research and practice in coping with stress, crisis and trauma," as it notes on its website, while "enjoying the vibrant social and cultural life of Tel Aviv.

"And unlike the more traditional junior-year abroad programs for undergrads, these new programs are not designed specifically with Jewish students in mind. Many of them, in fact, attract students from Asia and Africa.

The prices vary, ranging from $8,900 for a year's tuition at the University of Haifa to anywhere from $15,000 to $32,000 a year at Tel Aviv University (with its international Master of Business Administration program at the very high end). For students from the United States, where a master's degree can cost anywhere from $20,000 to $50,000, this might still be considered a bargain. But for Europeans, where higher education is often free or highly subsidized, not as much.

In Israel, for comparison's sake, annual tuition is slightly upwards of $2,000 a year at public universities and more than $6,000 a year at private colleges.

Forging ties through academia

Hebrew University Rector Sarah Stroumsa says these programs are not meant to rescue Israel's institutions of higher education from their financial difficulties. “At the moment, it’s not about the revenues, though it might eventually become something lucrative, and we certainly wouldn’t have any objection to that.”

Rather, she says, the objective is to forge ties with the next generation of top-notch academics in the world. “We want students from Yale, Princeton and the Sorbonne — good graduate students who will go on to become great researchers in the future. This is about making contact with them now.”

The latest addition to the Hebrew University's English-language offerings is a new Master of Laws program in international business law and intellectual property to be launched this fall.

Ben-Gurion University in the Negev piloted an English-language master's program in Israel Studies this past year, which will be officially launched in the 2012/13 academic year. According to Ariel Feldstein, the academic secretary at Ben-Gurion, increasing the number of such English-language programs has become a top priority for the university.

At the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, a pioneer in the development of English-language higher education (primarily at the undergraduate level) in Israel, 1,400 students from 86 countries are currently enrolled in its English-language programs. The latest addition to its graduate listings is a new specialization in global business leadership.

Earlier this year, the Academy of the Hebrew Language expressed deep concerns about the growing use of English in Israeli academia and demanded that Education Minister Gideon Sa’ar take action to combat the trend. At Tel Aviv University, there are currently 300 students enrolled in 11 English-language master's programs. They are mainly from North America, but also from Europe and, increasingly, from Asia, according to Maureen Adiri, director of the university's international school.

"I think we can double that number within five years," she says.

In addition to its English-language graduate programs, Tel Aviv University will be opening a three-year English-language bachelor's degree program in liberal arts in the coming school year. A four-year English-language bachelor's degree program in management will be launched the following year.

The added benefit of these programs, notes Adiri, is that they help create ambassadors for Israel around the globe.

"We have to be careful with what we say about this because we’re not training ambassadors here, but it’s certainly a way of opening the minds of these students to Israel."

Alexander, from the University of Haifa, concurs.

"It's no secret that we have a hard time telling our story abroad, especially on college campuses," he says. "This is an opportunity to bring these students here without telling them any story. They simply get to see what Israel is about and draw their own conclusions."

In the past academic year, 25 international students were enrolled in the University of Haifa's English-language graduate programs. Half were Jewish and half were non-Jews, according to Alexander.

"We expect to have 70 next year and double it every year as we move along," he says. He calls this a trend that will have a dramatic impact on the profile and status of Israeli universities in the future.

"It means a different Israeli university, a more diverse university, a more connected university, and one less isolated in the world."