

July 12, 2020

Dear members of the University,

Re: Significant risk to the independence of the higher education system in Israel

I am forced to write you this letter with a heavy heart and great sorrow. Difficult days are passing on the higher education system in Israel, and this is only the beginning. Within weeks of his appointment as Minister of Higher Education, I, along with the other heads of the Israeli universities, have lost faith in Minister Elkin.

Shortly after taking office, the Minister tried in various ways to intervene within the campuses in our relationship – both academic and non-academic - with our students. We managed to stop it up to a point. But then we got to the issue of exams during the coronavirus period. The Minister, following a request from students, contacted the Ministry of Health and asked for an order preventing the holding of exams on campus. We learned about this - all the heads of universities - through the media. He did not bother to consult us, and only when the protests began, he announced in an informal conversation with us that he would agree to allow a few exceptions, according to individual requests addressed to him. Yes - the Minister not only wished to be the one to tell us whether we are allowed to hold exams on campus, but also which exams are allowed to be on campus and which are not - in engineering, law or psychology!

The order that the Minister of Higher Education “summoned” from the Ministry of Health came out, banning exams on campus. This is in stark contrast to the exam guidelines issued by Professor Sadetsky, who you know is not one of the most liberal when it comes to health matters. All this, while there is no ban on gatherings in restaurants, synagogues, beaches, and in fact - subject to the observance of precautionary rules and the number of gatherings - almost everywhere. All this while universities maintained the necessary precautionary and distance rules, and when, as far as we know, there was not even one verified case of contamination within campuses in Israel! We were forced, by virtue of the order, to stop giving exams on campus. Many exams were postponed or held "remotely", with the score in many of these exams was binary (pass or fail), due to the fear of compromising the integrity of the exams.

Following these events, a subcommittee of the MALAG was appointed, and the universities submitted a balanced examination plan, which takes into account health considerations on the one hand, and academic considerations on the other. This subcommittee adopted most of the universities' recommendations and favored them over an alternative exam plan submitted by the Minister of Higher Education. However, the Minister refused to convene the MALAG to discuss the subcommittee's recommendations that did not comply with his wishes. Only last Thursday, in the shadow of a petition by the universities to the Supreme Court, did the MALAG convene. The night before the meeting, at the last minute, in a way that the universities would not be able to respond to the contents, the Minister distributed a letter from the Director General of the Ministry of Health, addressed to him two days earlier, that was identical in its content (what a surprise) to the Minister's demands. On this background, the Minister's plan was adopted.

Shortly before this affair, the Minister of Higher Education visited Ariel University, and then announced that a representative from this university would be appointed to the Planning and Budgeting Committee (*Vatat*). There is no more important committee than this one, which is responsible for budgeting the higher education system, and which is supposed to be an apolitical body that serves as a buffer between the government and the academic institutions in Israel. Shortly thereafter, the minister named the person he intends to appoint to *Vatat*, without consulting university heads (he did so technically, after being told that he is legally required to do so). This is in contradiction to the practice for many years, whereby the University Heads Committee (*VERA*) proposes candidates, and the Minister chooses among them. The person who was proposed by the Minister was not an academically worthy candidate. After clear evidence was presented, the candidate decided to withdraw his candidacy. Immediately thereafter, the Minister proposed three other candidates, all from Ariel University, while *VERA* proposed four candidates, supported by the University presidents. Three of them were from Ben-Gurion University (which has not had a representative in *VATAT* for the last 16 years).

The position of *VERA* is that the candidates from Ariel University are not ineligible, of course. Ariel University is indeed considered a university, according to the Israeli law, and its faculty members may be valid candidates for *VATAT*. However, it is evident that the Minister of Higher Education is looking to appoint emissaries, and through whom he will gain control of this important committee. This intention is evident by his statements, and all his actions, those exposed in the media and those not exposed. **I do not want to think what will happen to the higher education in Israel if the Minister achieves his intentions to control *VATAT*!**

The need to protect academic freedom and university independence has never been so urgent as it is today. The council of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, in an unprecedented move, addressed a firm letter to the Minister of Higher Education. In the letter, the council emphasized that it is "anxious for the independence and excellence of the higher education system in Israel."

Please see <https://www.academy.ac.il/News/NewsItem.aspx?nodeId=658&id=1862>

The heads of the universities are as anxious as I am, and as is the council of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, from what might happen to us, and are imbued with the belief that we must do everything in our power to remove the danger to the independence of the higher education system in Israel. I believe that in the coming weeks the voices of criticism against the Minister will be shared by individuals from business, humanities, media and high-tech, as well as from the public, from all sides of the political spectrum. They all will soon realize that the politicization of the higher education system could eventually turn us into a third world country, where universities are controlled by the government, where there is no freedom of thought, and where science is subordinated to party interests.

I assure you that the heads of the universities and I will not rest until this danger to the independence of the higher education system passes. I trust that you, my friends, will help us in this struggle, which we are only in the beginning of.

Yours,
Ariel