
Shutting off the Academic Oxygen

by

Dan Ben-David

In a country that regards history as the events of the last quarter while the future is the next quarter, who even bothers to connect the dots? When this is the national perspective, it should not be a surprise that there is no vision or strategy to guide us. As a result, the country has been meandering along from one quarter to another, from one year to the following year, and from one decade to the next. This is the mindset that brought us to where we are today. As for the future, may God help us, since it is not certain that we will still be able to do so ourselves.

In an increasingly open world, in which competition is growing between developed countries – and it is just beginning with the east’s awakening giants – Israel will never be able to contend with the either quantities of manpower no with the resources available to its competitors. As if this were not enough, we live in a region that is home to more and more shrill voices calling for our annihilation, voices that are backed up by quantities of resources and people that are far beyond our capacity to match. In these two realms, so vital for Israel’s future, the key to our survival – not to mention prosperity – lies not in quantities but in quality.

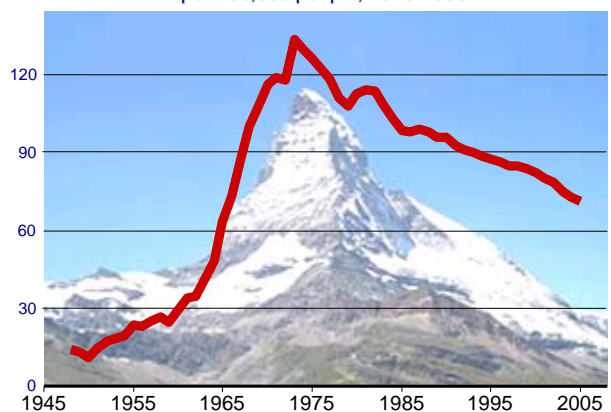
The locomotives of quality are the universities. They are where we provide ideas for our current generation and educate those who will lead the country, navigate its economy, strengthen its defense, enrich its culture and disseminate accumulated knowledge to future generations. Under Israel’s current circumstances, simply reaching the frontier of human knowledge is an insufficient goal. The precariousness of our situation mandates that we break through it time and again to maintain our comparative advantage in world markets and in defense. If knowledge is the country’s oxygen, then its universities are the primary source of this oxygen.

During the first decades of its existence, Israel succeeded in creating – from nothing – an academia of historic proportions. The country’s founding fathers had the foresight to plant the roots, nurture them despite the very scarce resources, and somehow bring to life what became one of the world’s leading academic systems. But then, in midstride, the nation – which had become substantially wealthier – diametrically changed its national priorities. In the latter half of its short life, Israel dispatched its higher education to wither in the wilderness of neglect.

Israel's population grew by two and a half times between 1950 and 1973. During this period, the size of the faculty *per capita* rose by a factor of 12. The sharp change in national priorities that occurred since is clearly evident in the diagram, which is similar to a silhouette of Mount Matterhorn. Considerable sacrifices enabled us to scale its steep left incline. Since the seventies, we have been in a free-fall plummet down the right wing. While the country’s population more than doubled, the number of senior faculty positions rose by just 12 percent (31 percent if the colleges are included). The Technion – an institution that we expect to be at the fore of the high-tech revolution – has today just one more

Senior faculty in Israeli universities

per 100,000 people, 1948-2006



source: Dan Ben-David, "Brain Drained" (2008).

faculty position than it did in 1973. Israel's two flagship universities, the Hebrew University and Tel-Aviv, the number of positions fell by 14 percent and 21 percent, respectively. In per capita terms, the total number of senior faculty positions in Israeli universities today is one-half what it was in 1973.

An entire generation of exceptional scholars was stranded on the outside. While in some disciplines there are other/additional reasons for the academic brain drain, it is no coincidence that the share of Israelis residing in top American universities – rather than here – is unparalleled in its magnitude.

Human excellence is not a luxury on whose survival in the wilderness of neglect we can afford to gamble on. Whoever shuts off this oxygen source can expect severe breathing problems in the future.