HIGHER EDUCATION IN TRANSITION – THE CASE OF ISRAEL –
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This comparative study examines the impact of the conflicting higher education traditions of Germany, Great Britain and the United States on the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in particular, and higher education in Israel in general.

The basic differences of these traditions concerning the aims of higher education – research, instruction and service – and their effects on higher education in Israel are evident in major decisions made by the Hebrew University at three critical stages in its development: (1) its initial organization into research institutes rather than into teaching faculties or departments (1925); (2) its decision to undertake teacher training and the inclusion of education as a scientific discipline (1935); (3) “The Reform” – introduction of undergraduate studies and the adoption of the three level degree structure (1950). These decisions were influenced simultaneously by the changing needs of the growing Jewish community in Palestine and by major events that affected the course of the Zionist movement.

This study has shown that higher education in Israel was shaped in its initial stages of development by the elitist European (especially German) tradition. Gradually, however, the American populistic tradition became the dominant influence, broadening the curriculum and the function of the university to meet the scientific developments as well as the needs of the individual and the society in a newly born country.

Introduction

A comparative study of the patterns that shaped those higher education institutions of Israel which were established before the founding of the State of Israel, e.g., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Technion (Israel Institute of Technology-Haifa) (Technion, 1953), is essential for understanding that system today.

The development of higher education in Israel was influenced by the educational traditions of Germany, Great Britain and the United States. These are reflected in the academic and administrative structure, fields of study, academic freedom, and especially the basic aims of higher education: research, instruction and service to the public at large (see for example: Flexner, 1930).
These traditions represent three distinctive models in higher education. Since we intend to discuss the development of higher education in Israel from the perspective of these three models, let us sum up briefly their essential traits.

The basic characteristics of the German model were: the freedom to teach and to learn (lehrfreiheit und lernfreiheit); the quadripartite faculty structure, excluding technology, engineering, business administration and all of the other "practical professions"; and the view that the university is primarily a research institute (Paulsen, 1906; Jaspers, 1923).

The relevant features of the British model (especially "Oxbridge" but the "Provincial Universities" too) can be summarized in the words of Cardinal Newman (1852) who assumed that the "object" of the university is: "the diffusion and extension of knowledge [teaching] rather than the advancement" (research) (p. XXVII); its role is "raising the intellectual tone of society" (p. 134). Similarly Alfred North Whitehead (1929) and Sir Richard Livingstone (1943) stressed the university's responsibility to moral education, spiritual discipline and character formation rather than research. This explains partially the inclusion of professional training and the tutorial relationship in British universities (Carmichael, 1959).

The most influential features of the American model which affected the development of the Hebrew University were the harmonious blend of instruction, service and research – interrelated with the three level degree structure and the professional schools; the elective system and the overall tendency of the American system toward comprehensiveness and flexibility in form and content (Flexner, 1930; Butts, 1939; Veysey, 1965; Ben-David, 1972).

Although it is difficult to isolate any one of these traditions as having had a particularly exclusive influence; it is possible to display distinctively the prevalence of one or another tradition, in the decisions that the university was called upon to make during different periods of its development. Along with the external effects of the academic traditions and sometimes in opposition to them, there was constant pressure on the University as well as on the Technion to accustom themselves to the changing circumstances of the "Yishuv", the Jewish community in Palestine, and later to the needs of the newly-created State of Israel.

In this study we will illustrate the influence of the various higher education traditions as manifested in three major decisions made by the Hebrew University concerning (1) academic structure (research institutes – 1925); (2) inclusion of new disciplines, particularly from the social sciences (education – 1935); and (3) learning and degree structure ("The Reform" – 1950). The National (Zionist), social and political background for these decisions will be analyzed.