

The People's University Project at Tel Aviv University

Summary

The People's University project is an original initiative with no precedent in Israel or abroad, whereby Tel Aviv University (TAU) opens its doors to marginalized groups in Israel and invites them to take part in special introductory courses taught by TAU students. The People's University targets groups such as new immigrants, battered women, alienated or at-risk youth, and ethnic minorities, and enables them to acquire knowledge in fields such as law, economics, medicine, political science, philosophy, and art. Among the project's goals are, bridging social gaps in Israel and increasing accessibility to knowledge (and subsequently formal education), while nurturing a social consciousness among TAU students.

The People's University: Redressing the Knowledge Gap

The People's University aims to redress the problem of dependency that arises from a disparity of knowledge between various groups in Israeli society. Research has shown that knowledge and information concentrated in one segment of society renders other segments that are not exposed to this knowledge dependant on the dominant social group.

Founded upon the belief that knowledge is a resource that should be shared by all, the People's University enables TAU students to share the knowledge they acquire during their studies with individuals whose access to university studies is limited at best. It facilitates a unique interaction between TAU students and project participants, initiating dialogue that goes beyond the educational context and allowing both groups to get to know one another. This "meeting of the minds" creates a bond that paves the way for future cooperation between social groups.

In addition to the benefits for the community at large, the People's University also enriches research conducted at TAU. The direct flow of information from the field

enables researchers to follow social, cultural and economic trends within specific population groups, thereby advancing their academic studies.

The People's University: Description

Participants

In the first academic year (2005/2006), the People's University welcomed approximately 200 adults and underprivileged teenagers. This year (2006/2007) more than 300 adults and teenagers participate in the program.

They study in homogenous groups of approximately 40 participants each.

Among the groups are: groups of Ethiopian immigrants, battered women, at-risk youth, juvenile delinquents, ex-drug addicts, and ex-convicts.

Participants are brought to the University once a week by prearranged transportation throughout the entire academic year and are provided with a light meal during each visit.

They each take an annual introductory course in one of three subjects: law, economics, and medicine (see next section for details). At the end of the year they are awarded a diploma recognized by the Israeli Ministry of Employment for continuing education.

Students who have completed the project will be encouraged to pursue a formal academic education, with scholarships being offered to outstanding candidates.

Instructors

Third-year TAU students serve as instructors of the courses.

Throughout the year they participate in a preparatory course where they meet the target groups, plan the course outline, acquire leadership skills, and deal with social responsibility issues. Participation in the course, as well as the teaching duties, grants them between 6-8 credits toward their academic degree.

Future Plans

During the subsequent academic year (2007/2008), the People's University will add two additional courses from among the fields of psychology, communications, biology, arts, history and philosophy. The number of participants will be increased to 400.

Further expansion of the People's University will be undertaken according to the demand for and success of the project, with the ultimate aim of offering an introductory course in every major field taught at TAU.

A joint committee comprising representatives of all the supporters of the project will be established. The committee will convene at designated intervals to examine the curriculum, review accomplishments, address implementation problems and propose improvements.

Content of Introductory Courses

Initially, the People's University offers participants introductory courses in law, medicine and management.

- "Introduction to Law" provides students with basic knowledge on the structure of the judicial system, the various authorities, and the rights and duties of Israeli citizens, as well as elementary knowledge in contract law, torts, criminal law, labor law, family law and more.
- "Introduction to Medicine" clarifies basic terms, such as heart attack, cancer or clinical death; conduct training in preventive medicine issues, hygiene, birth control, nutrition and SPR; and explains the structure of the medical system and services provided by the HMOs, among other issues.
- "Introduction to Management" offers participants basic knowledge on economics and finance, elucidating issues such as the significance of the consumer price index and inflation and how they affect us; the role of the Israeli Bank and its governor; and the meaning of an economic plan.

Beyond theoretical content, the People's University exposes participants to the various government authorities, their methods of operation and the differences between them, as well as to various social and emergency services. Basic skills, such as oral and written communication needed for dealing with government authorities, are also emphasized and developed.

Goals of the People's University

The People's University will reap benefits on three levels:

For participants:

Empowerment – gaining practical knowledge and tools that will help them cope better in their daily lives.

Enrichment – gaining general knowledge in various fields, some with direct connection to daily life and others that will promote personal development.

Opportunity – getting access to a higher education experience and the chance of winning scholarships for degree studies.

For TAU students:

Social commitment – familiarizing students with different populations, including understanding their problems and special needs, and building bridges to these populations based on mutual respect and common goals.

Academic empowerment – deepening TAU students' understanding of their course material and their ability to use it in the future. In most university classes, the educational process is accomplished through memorization of facts and data and does not facilitate practical expression of the knowledge acquired. People's University courses will require the student to pass on the material he or she has learned to others, including explaining and simplifying complex data and information.

Enrichment – developing teaching and communication skills, collaborative team work abilities (instruction will be done in teams of 3-4 instructors) and public speaking.

For Israeli society:

Bridging social gaps – narrowing the knowledge gap and minimizing social dependency, as well as creating a direct line of communication between underprivileged populations and the academy.

Increasing accessibility – shattering the ivory tower image by opening up the University to new populations, and enriching and educating disempowered groups who would otherwise have no access to university studies.

Supporting academic research – by providing direct access to field data, People's University will provide TAU researchers with updated and pertinent data that will critical to TAU research in fields such as sociology, education, public health, etc.

The Project Creator and Manager

- Dr. Adi Koll

TAU Faculty Supporting the Initiative

- Chairman of Tel Aviv University Executive Committee, Mr. Dov Lautman
- President of Tel Aviv University, Prof. Itamar Rabinovich
- Dean of special programs, Prof. David Menashri
- Dean of the Law School, Prof. Ariel Porat