



Open letter in support of the Department of Government and Politics at BGU

To the
Honourable Minister of Education and The Distinguished Members of the
Mr Gideon Sa'ar Council for Higher Education

Honourable Minister, distinguished members of the CHE,

The Israeli-European Policy Network (IEPN) has followed with great concern the debate on the fate of the Department of Government and Politics at Ben Gurion University Beer Sheva (BGU). The Council for Higher Education (CHE) will, on 23 October 2012, consider a controversial recommendation from its Subcommittee for Quality Assurance to halt student registration at the department. If this recommendation is followed, this would constitute a severe threat to the very existence of this department.

The IEPN is deeply concerned about this development, which in effect amounts to a severe threat not only to this particular department, but also to academic freedom in Israel as a whole. The IEPN thus joins into the Israeli and international criticism this issue has already raised. The IEPN appeals to you to ensure that implementation of this or other decisions threatening the department are reverted.

The IEPN is since more than one decade deeply committed to sustain a continuous, long-term, constructive and critical dialogue between decision-makers, key public figures, academics, journalists, business people and other professional groups from Israel and the EU. Working under the direction of the Israel Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), and its partners, the MACRO Center for Political Economics, Tel Aviv and the Universität der Bundeswehr in Munich, the IEPN regularly brings together a huge number of academics and decision makers from various sides of the political spectrum in Israel and the EU. Among others, the IEPN cooperates closely with several members of the European Parliament, the Knesset and various national European parliaments as well as with former ministers from Europe and Israel. In our ranks we also have members of the Israeli and European foreign ministries, including former ambassadors, as well as representatives from EU institutions.

In that context, the IEPN also has a long and established track record of working not only with leading European scholars but also with distinguished scholars from Israel. We have in the past cooperated with many of Israel's excellent universities and research centres, amongst them the Department of Government and Politics at BGU. Due to our long-term experience in cooperating with key members of this department, we can only attest to its academic excellence and integrity, collectively and individually. This is not only visible in relation to the work of department staff in the context of IEPN, but also with regard to the many publications of department members with leading international publishers and journals, their significant fund-raising for research projects, as well as the popularity of their key study programmes amongst Israeli students.

However, notwithstanding the undisputed academic merits of the department, on 5 September 2012, a Subcommittee of the CHE proposed suspending student registration in the department for the academic year 2013-14, a step that if implemented will effectively lead to the closure of the department. This decision is totally at odds with the evaluation written by the two international members, which it has appointed to oversee the process, Prof. Risse and Prof. Immergut. Both international members have in the meantime made their concerns about this procedure and the conclusions of the Subcommittee public.

On 23 October the CHE will be meeting to vote on the recommendations of the Subcommittee. The approval of the decision by the CHE would constitute a devastating blow to academic independence in Israel - never in the history of Israeli academia has a department been shut down by the CHE. Given its strong record in research and teaching there is no justification that this should be the fate of a strong academic institution such as the Department of Government and Politics at BGU. However, this threat to the existence of the Department of Politics and Government at BGU endangers not only this one particular department. It also jeopardises the reputation of the CHE as a council committed to impartial and objective evaluation procedures and could ultimately be interpreted as a threat to academic freedom in Israel.

Based on our careful assessment of this whole process, the IEPN strongly urges to reconsider the proposal by the Subcommittee and ensure that the Department of Government and Politics at BGU, a department renowned internationally for its strong academic outlook, will continue to function as a place of developing the Negev as a place of academic excellence and free and uninhibited academic thinking.

Dr. Ralf Hexel, Director FES Israel

Christoph Moosbauer, Member of Executive Board Concilium AG, EU Coordinator IEPN

Dr. Roby Nathanson, Director Macro Center for Political Economics, Tel Aviv, Israel
Coordinator IEPN

Prof. Dr. Stephan Stetter, Chair International Politics and Conflicts Studies, Universität der Bundeswehr Munich, EU Coordinator IEPN