

# Effective Regulation of the Israeli Higher Education System in the Global and Neoliberal Era

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## Abstract

For over six decades Israel's system of higher education has been managed by the Ministry of Education and the Council for Higher Education (CHE). During this period, significant transitions have occurred in the academic system throughout the world and in Israel, leaving their mark on research and teaching and on the related regulatory agencies. The purpose of the study is to examine the need for regulation of higher education in a capitalist world, with Israel serving as a case study.

The study examines the CHE's management of changes that occurred in the academic world and the overall considerations utilized by the pilots of this regulatory agency, which led to shaping policy from a perspective of time and with an eye to the challenges of the future, in comparison to supervisory agencies around the world. The research method is based on research literature addressing the system of higher education in Israel and elsewhere as well as on interviews with senior academics occupying key positions in the CHE in the past and present. The research findings indicate that the CHE has a bureaucratic image, a short-sighted policy, and that it reacts to events more than leading them, as opposed to its declared goal of promoting high standard, innovative, and accessible research and teaching processes to benefit the economy and society.

The conclusion generated by the research findings is that implementation of a hybrid model suitable for the twenty first century, which combines liberalization and regulation, should be explored. This model will let institutions of higher education develop independently while reducing government supervision, and will allow the regulatory body to regulate their activity via incentives and restrictions, while identifying market failures that it will define. Such a regulatory body will include an array of academic experts from the field of higher education with proven experience in the fields of academic research and teaching, in order to separate the managing of Israel's system of higher education from politics and bureaucracy.

**Keywords:** Council for Higher Education, academia, regulation, higher education, public policy

## 1. Introduction

Israel's Council for Higher Education (CHE) was established in 1958 as a supervisory authority of Israel's academic institutions. At that time, the political economic worldview in Israel advocated a relatively large degree of centralism, enabling the government to control the economy and free market forces. Higher education was considered a resource attributed to the higher socioeconomic classes. Some saw it as an official mark confirming the superiority of the wealthy, who acquired a wider education that made it possible for them to increase their economic might, and so on in a constant cycle. Those who could not afford to acquire a higher education made do with lower level jobs for which they received low pay that did not allow them or the next generations to acquire such an education and breach the cycle of poverty. The development of globalization, technology, and information in recent decades, concurrent with political reforms, led to an increase in the number of institutions of higher education in the world in general and in Israel in particular, as well as greater competition between them, and hence lowered barriers to higher education.

At present, in the neoliberal era, higher education is perceived as a consumer product for all purposes, and its

price and extent are determined by free market forces. Accordingly, the worldview currently prevalent in Israel is one that gives free market forces greater freedom of action in the different branches of the economy, society, and finance, in the belief that government regulation might often be a delaying element that could hamper the efficacy of processes and therefore regulation should be avoided as much as possible. In fact, according to the neoliberal worldview free market forces should be allowed to lead the economy and society with no government direction, so long as the government's goals and aims are attained. However, in cases when these goals and aims are not achieved by free market forces the latter should be defined as market failures and various policy tools, i.e., regulation, should be utilized (McGuigan, 2005). In order to understand the justification underlying the continued existence of the CHE as a regulatory agency in the neoliberal era, it is necessary to examine the goals and aims of higher education and to identify market failures that prevent an uninhibited free market from achieving these goals and aims, thus justifying the existence of the CHE as a regulatory agency that acts to regulate market forces towards those goals.

Hence, this study examines the set of considerations employed by the pilots of this regulatory body, who advanced the policy designed on central issues from a perspective of time on one hand and with an eye to the challenges of the future, compared to supervisory bodies elsewhere, on the other. This investigation will help explore the efficacy of the CHE as perceived by policymakers, and determine whether it is an efficient body that leads processes and advances a current policy that anticipates the future or one that only regulates developments shaped by free market forces. This question might have implications for the role of the CHE in a period characterized by frequent and dynamic changes requiring rapid decisions and implementation. The relevance of the CHE will be examined in light of several steps taken in global higher education in recent decades that demand its attention, such as public education versus private education, accessibility versus excellence, research versus teaching, implementation of digital teaching in higher education, and its relevance in the employment market. The uniqueness of this study is in being a pioneer study that is the first to examine the contribution of the CHE to the development of Israel's higher education and its essential role in the current neoliberal world. The research conclusions can help form a model that will allow the shaping and implementation of an efficient and updated public policy for promoting Israel's system of higher education and responding to current needs.

In 1993 a reform was instituted in Israel's system of higher education, which led in about a decade to a deep change in the structure of opportunities for acquiring an academic education (Note 1). As a result of this reform, Israel's system of higher education changed its profile and since the early 1990s many colleges have joined the universities, creating a more extensive and open structure of higher education in a wide array of disciplines. Consequently, the system of higher education doubled in only one decade, with the high demand for academic studies on one hand and the opening of new schools on the other making it possible to expand and offer access to higher education to Israel's general population (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2016). Therefore, it appears that the CHE's goal of increasing accessibility and expanding higher education in Israeli society has been attained.

### *1.1 Israel's Council for Higher Education: Structure, Goals, and Authority*

The website of Israel's Council for Higher Education declares on its home page: "The Council for Higher Education (CHE) outlines the policy of the system of higher education, and the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) is responsible for its planning and budgeting. They labor to develop research and teaching, promote quality and excellence, and make the system accessible to the entire population." The CHE is an official body established by law in 1958 as the government authority in charge of supervising, validating, and approving the functioning of Israel's higher education (Note 2).

Enactment of this law was preceded by eight years of strong dissension between the government's wish to dictate the courses of action and research directions employed by institutions of higher education to suit the needs of the people and of the state, and the opinion of several Knesset members who claimed that government intervention and channeling the system of higher education according to its needs contradicts the necessary conditions for the flourishing of academic research and teaching. According to the latter, the universities would flourish only if their liberty is assured and if the government does not have excessive centralized authority that will prevent the involvement of scientific research in Israel's academic institutions (Volanski, 2005). This dispute indicates the doubts regarding justification of the CHE's existence, or at least its goals and authority, as well as its current relevance in the neoliberal era that espouses freedom of action and thought for free market forces and the various actors within this market.

As a regulatory body, the CHE's goal is to implement regulation processes regarding the activity of Israel's education system by means of laws, regulations, rules, and instructions determined by the government in general and the Ministry of Education in particular. In this function it serves as a tool for regularization of policy,

including in the fields of economics, education, and society (Tevet & Gal-Nor, 2010). By virtue of its authority, the CHE serves as the entity in charge of awarding recognition to Israel's institutions of higher education, sets rules and terms for granting these institutions permission to operate, and supervises the upholding of these rules as well as the quality of the study disciplines and the adequate scientific level, so long as these rules do not limit the freedom of opinion and of conscience. Moreover, the CHE offers recognized institutions recommendations regarding their further establishment, expansion, and upgrading, as well as academic collaborations in teaching and research. In addition, by virtue of its authority the CHE can authorize institutions of higher education operating abroad to open branches in Israel (Note 3).

Similar to other regulatory bodies, the CHE too is inspected and criticized by heads of the academic institutions, politicians, and various economic and social figures. Furthermore, since the CHE encompasses many members who are themselves employed in the system of higher education, there is a concern of conflicts of interests and biased decisions in favor of the personal or institutional interests of these members (Volanski, 2005).

### *1.2 The Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC)*

The CHE operated for about fourteen years until a decision was reached in 1972 to establish an internal committee in charge of planning and distributing the budget among the institutions of higher education, called the "Planning and Budgeting Committee" (PBC). The direct causes of establishing the PBC were the considerable increase in the number of students in the country's first two decades, unequal access by students from different social and ethnic backgrounds, and deficits accumulated by the universities (Volanski, 2005).

This committee is responsible for budgeting the institutions of higher education, while taking into account the needs of society and of the state, striving to promote research and education, and maintaining the schools' academic and administrative freedom. Its authority derives from its status as an independent body that stands between the government and national organs on one hand and the institutions of higher education on the other, with regard to budgeting the system of higher education. Therefore, the government and national organs may not receive requests or recommendations directly from the institutions of higher education themselves or from any other source and all budgeting must follow PBC recommendations. Hence, the PBC is the exclusive authorized agency that decides how budgets will be allocated to the various institutions of higher education, taking into account the needs of society and of the state. PBC decisions are conveyed to the CHE, which is required to address the requests of the various schools to open new programs for degrees and different tracks. Notably, the CHE's decisions with regard to opening study programs and tracks, based on the opinion of the PBC, constitute in many cases a source of pressure and a point of dissension and strong criticism against these bodies, in the claim that their decisions might be affected by irrelevant political considerations (Casher, 2018).

### *1.3 The Role of the System of Higher Education in Regulating the Employment Market*

With the achievement of its initial goal to expand knowledge and education among Israel's general society, it appears that the justification for the CHE's continued existence as a regulatory body depends on its ability to diagnose and handle market failures formed in the interaction between the system of higher education and the employment market. The responsibility of the system of higher education in different countries around the world for regulating the labor market and adapting it to the needs of the local economy, is manifested by public policy that endeavors to shape the system of higher education according to these needs and goals (Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2003; Pasque, 2010; Sin & Amaral, 2016).

Many studies have addressed the existing interface between the labor market and the system of higher education from different perspectives. One conspicuous example is the study conducted by Albert, who examined the association between changes in the Spanish labor market and the country's system of higher education (Albert, 2000). Another example is the study of Elias and Purcell, who examined the contribution of the system of higher education to the employment market (Elias & Purcell, 2004). Then again, the study conducted by Brennan and colleagues questioned the capacity of higher education to properly prepare its graduates for the employment market and allow them to find suitable, fitting, and satisfactory jobs (Brennan et al, 1993).

Moreover, there are examples from around the world of government organs that shape the system of higher education even without being directly associated with it. For instance the UK, where the UK Commission for Employment and Skills ((UKCES) (Note 4) acts to plan the employment market and system of higher education in the long range and helps to shape the local system of higher education, in the understanding that this system is directly related to the local employment market and therefore it must be shaped by an organ linked to the field of employment rather than to the system of higher education itself. Similar to the UK, in the United States as well the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) conducts a quantitative forecast of professions. The US prediction relates to the entire population and takes into account demographic and economic changes as well as production volumes

in the industrial branches and vocational employment (Cohen, 2018).

In contrast, examination of the Israeli state of affairs shows that in practice the CHE does not intervene with regard to admission thresholds to the various disciplines, and in fact leaves these to the free market forces (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2015). This sometimes creates distortions in the employment market, affecting the efficiency of the economy and of society. Indeed, the CHE implements (through the PBC) a public policy based on a differential budgeting model in order to set the different subsidy rates granted to the various institutions. The purpose of this model is to reflect the desire of the economy's leaders to determine the number of those employed in the different industries and to affect the admission policies of academic institutions such that they will give preference to receiving students to departments for which the government provides more subsidies and reduce the number of students in departments with lower subsidies. In practice, however, these policies are not capable of truly affecting the demand for the various disciplines as this is formed by the candidates who apply to the schools. Public policy does not include incentives and benefits for those registering to the different disciplines, generating a possibility of market failure when there are too little academic graduates of disciplines required by the economy or alternately an uncontrolled flow of young people who wish to study a certain discipline unrelated to the demand in the labor market, which ultimately creates an excess of workers relative to the supply of jobs.

The results of this deficient policy, which may lead to distortions in the employment market, constitute a fairly conspicuous research focus. A study that examined the successful process of increasing access to higher education in Israel and its impact on the integration of graduates in the employment market and hence on increasing their income, showed that an academic degree per se is not sufficient in order to ensure financial or employment security. Employees who are graduates of the social sciences and the humanities may find that their pay is no higher than that of those who have no higher education. One of the consequences, which can already be identified, is attempts to acquire a higher degree in the thought that it may improve the learners' financial status. The study concludes that the equation "higher education means a higher income" includes additional components such as field of study, seniority, and the market to which the employee belongs (Davidovitch et al, 2013). Similarly, a study that examined differences in the quality of education between universities and colleges attested to considerable differences between the compensation received in the labor market by university and college graduates (Zusman, Forman, Kaplan & Romanov, 2007).

Moreover, a study conducted recently by the Bank of Israel examined the likelihood that graduates of Israeli higher education would find a job consistent with their education, and found a conspicuous incompatibility between the worker's level of education and occupation (Rosenfeld et al, 2019). Another study showed that the various fields of education vary with regard to their contribution to the graduate's earning capacity, such that it is not enough to acquire a higher education, rather the need for a specific field of education in the domestic market should be examined before commencing one's studies in order to find a job with suitable pay that can improve the graduate's socioeconomic status. Therefore, given that higher education does not necessarily contribute to finding a suitable job with adequate pay, the question is whether it contributes to reducing income inequality in the economy and the existing socioeconomic gaps between society's various populations groups.

The goal of the CHE with regard to interaction with the local labor market is to ensure that the academic institutions "produce" graduates in the various disciplines of the necessary quality and quantity required by the local economy. Otherwise, market failures will be generated that will be manifested in a lack and/or excess of different professionals, which might affect society in general and distort the employment market (absorption of workers who are unsuitable for their job, higher pay in desirable professions due to the lack of skilled workers, reduced pay in professions that have an excess of skilled workers, and more).

Public policy shaped and implemented by the CHE, one that seeks to anticipate the future, should recognize that the global labor market in general and the Israeli one in particular has experienced considerable changes in recent decades and is expected to see additional changes in the next few decades. These changes originate from demographic, technological, gender, perceptual, and economic shifts that are affecting the labor market on various dimensions, among other things the structure of the market, the place of new technologies within it, the relationship between employees and employers, as well as the market's personnel needs. Therefore, the CHE would do well to examine and analyze future global and local trends and their anticipated effect on the domestic employment market and on the system of higher education, and to shape the system of higher education accordingly.

Additional changes that occur in the world from time to time with regard to technological developments, demographic changes, and health and other constraints, may encourage and sometimes even require the

adaptation of academic teaching to its manner of implementation. An example is the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, which compelled Israel's system of higher education (similar to those of other countries) to find prompt solutions for the new reality that prevented site-based activity on the various campuses and to institute e-learning in the entire academic system. The findings of a study conducted on this topic indicate that institutions of higher education encountered considerable practical difficulties that affected the efficacy of e-teaching in that period. Moreover, the development of e-teaching in Israel's system of higher education was found to be the outcome of needs, constraints, and opportunities that emerged in the free market rather than of an organized public policy by the Ministry of Education and the Council for Higher Education (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2020).

Hence, it appears that global processes such as privatization, liberalization, pandemics, and technological development, side by side with local processes related to socio-demographic changes, all lead to shifts in the needs of society and of the local labor market and require attention by policymakers in the CHE when attempting to shape the image of higher education in Israel.

## 2. Methodology

The research method is based on analysis of CHE policy as manifested in the research literature and in initial documents, in areas related to changes in the status of academic institutions, opening academic departments, allocating funds to academic institutions in the differential budgeting model, and others. This analysis will be conducted in comparison to higher education policy implemented in select countries around the world. In addition, the study includes a semi-structured questionnaire that examines the attitude of several senior academics with regard to the efficacy, influence, and objectiveness of CHE policy on several select issues over the years.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Review of the Various Regulatory Bodies in the System of Higher Education in Select Countries around the World

The various neoliberal democratic countries operate to ensure the proper and suitable functioning of the various life areas of their citizens (health, education, and culture). Hence, implementing a regulatory policy in the field of higher education for the purpose of monitoring public and private institutions, directing them, and ensuring adequate activity, is prevalent and customary in these countries (Casher, 2018). Global changes and the rise in demand for higher education require adaptation of traditional regulatory rules in order to ensure academic standards, including attention to significant innovations in teaching and assessment technologies and global harmony of research and achievements (Berkovitz, 2018). For this reason, many countries design innovative policy tools that take into account private and public social and economic benefits, which include norms and rules directed at the public interest, with regard to academic quality and economic productivity (Dill & Beerkens, 2010). Regulatory supervision requires institutions of higher education to demonstrate a high level of research, quality study programs, and recommended work methods for improving teaching and learning in a variety of areas, in order to promote and ensure the public interest of ensuring a high level of education and providing access to the general public (Dill & Beerkens, 2013).

#### 3.1.1 European Union Countries

The European Union is an entity that encompasses some 30 states of different nationalities, languages, and cultures. The motivations of the union are economic and political and it implements them using legal bureaucratic tools. The countries that belong to the union are committed to its various resolutions, including those related to the field of higher education. One of the conspicuous decisions concerning higher education was reached in 1999 (Note 5), and it asked the countries in the union to adapt their academic institutions to the principles of the European Commission and to develop a uniform system for quality assessment of institutions of higher education and for student achievements. Although these actions are funded by the European Union, it was determined that each country must operate an independent system to ensure the quality of the institutions and of the study programs in its system of higher education. This system cannot include academics, government officials, or regulators, rather only external professionals (Yeminy & Ben-Arzi, 2013), as detailed below:

**In France** two organs were founded in 2007 to fund and assess institutions of higher education, research centers, teaching departments, and study programs. The establishment of these bodies was based on amendments to the law that afford these institutions a large degree of autonomy in their internal management and organization as well as research and teaching programs (Paradeise, 2017).

**In Italy**, after many years when the system of higher education was under centralized bureaucratic control of an

academic guild, which led to the development of a failing and chaotic management, a decision was reached in the late 1980s to establish a new Ministry of Scientific and Technological Research (MISTR). This step marked a “watershed line” in Italy’s higher education policy and the beginning of a process of radical innovation that favored awarding didactic, organizational, and scientific autonomy to all universities in Italy. From then until the present, a process of policy shaping and development has been taking place in higher education, striving to grant universities significant autonomy in the understanding that this will improve their functioning (Capano, 2018). At the same time, the Italian government is constantly assessing the state of local higher education through the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research (ANVUR), established in 2011. This agency provides the government with information on the teaching and research apparatuses of the various academic institutions as well as on the necessary government regulation of these institutions (Turri, 2014).

**In Spain**, the various academic institutions operate under constant government supervision and responsibility. The Spanish government demands that institutions of higher education provide fundamental reports on their revenues and expenditures as well as on measurements of academic achievements and performance. The various institutions are budgeted according to this information, which encourages them to implement changes in order to meet the different criteria associated with funding (Larrán et al, 2016).

### 3.1.2 United Kingdom

British universities are public and not governmental and therefore they usually enjoy a large degree of autonomy, more than that customary in Europe. Nevertheless, in the early 21st century the British government began to apply increasing pressure on universities in the demand that they carry out various steps to increase efficiency (budget cuts, locating alternate income sources, increasing the number of students, thinning the faculty and reducing their pay, reducing the number of classrooms, and more) and subjecting the fields of academic specialization to market demands in Britain (Gur Zeev, 2007). Three regulatory bodies in charge of higher education operate in Britain: one is the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), responsible for distributing funds to institutions of higher education. This is a public body that does not belong to any government ministry and the members are chosen by their expertise in teaching or their experience in higher education, accompanied by external experts and advisors in various committees.

The second regulatory body is the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) that supervises instruction standards in academia. Members of the council (who number one hundred) are veteran academics who conduct periodic reviews for each academic institution in the country. The third regulatory agency is the Privy Council that is authorized by law to grant academic degrees in Britain. The number of members in the council is not constant and includes very senior government ministers, members of the royal family, senior judges, archbishops, British ambassadors, and the prime minister (Note 6).

### 3.1.3 United States

The United States has more than 2,500 universities and colleges, some government-run and some private. Government universities rely on government funding, revenues from tuition (subsidized for local residents), and donations, while the revenues of the private institutions derive from high tuition, donations, research funds, and intellectual property (Rabinovich, 2009).

Several US states operate a regulatory body called the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), which specializes in management and organization of higher education within the state with regard to educational and financial aspects. This organ emphasizes examination of the state’s needs and the employment market and connecting policymakers and educational leaders with the aim of providing a response to these needs (McGuinness, 2016). Processes of recognition and quality control of higher education in the United States are carried out by private non-profit organizations. These organizations are recognized by the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) in the federal Department of Education, which provides the Secretary of Education with recommendations regarding schools that it sees fit to recognize.

### 3.1.4 Australia

Australia has more than 200 institutions of higher education (Note 7) that are all subject to a large number of external demands by various agencies (the federal government, the state or authorities at the institution’s location, the Australian Education Senior Officials Committee, and federal or state professional bodies), which present regulatory demands that are enforced by law and aimed at improving quality. For years many different organs engaged in defining the various laws and demands and their enforcement, until the Australian government decided in 2009 to establish a body that would unite their activity. The purpose of the decision was to raise the

percentage of those receiving a higher education, increase the number of those enrolling in universities from among the weaker parts of the population, and expand academic fields of knowledge. In addition, this central body was charged with coordinating the foundations, scholarships, and budgets related to the system of higher education in one fund with uniform standards. This decision was not welcomed by the local authorities or by the institutions themselves, who sought to ensure their academic freedom (Woodhouse & Stella, 2011).

Moreover, in 2011 the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) was established in Australia. The role of this agency is to examine and approve institutions of higher education in Australia in general and course building processes and internal certification programs in those institutions in particular. The designation of the agency is to define and maintain quality standards in the academic institutions and to integrate the various governmental priorities (Bajada et al, 2019).

### 3.1.5 China

China has public and private institutions of higher education that are all subject to heavy government regulation. While public institutions are funded by the government and operate under the Communist party's central committee for higher education, private institutions operate under government laws that supervise, regulate, and monitor their activity in areas related to the number of students, amount of tuition, evaluation of teaching, formulation of university constitutions, and so on. Although the Chinese government does not directly fund these private institutions, it is entitled to decide major issues related to them and even to terminate their activity (Liu, 2018).

### 3.1.6 Singapore

From the early 2000s Singapore's system of higher education has acquired an international reputation, both regarding the level of studies and its emphasis on international business and commerce, and it constitutes an attraction for student exchanges from all over the western world. The local government operates extensive regulation of the system of higher education and tries to find the right balance between global and local agendas in order to preserve the high international status of this system.

Singapore's institutions of higher education are funded by the government based on the number of students. Moreover, the government encourages the institutions to hold international study programs ("global school"), whereby they accept foreign students, with the aim of attracting skilled people to the country, who will contribute to development of the economy. Despite the conspicuous involvement of the government in the system of higher education, the various institutions are granted the autonomy to set the tuition for Master's degree research programs.

Similar to China, Singapore too has public and private institutions of higher education. Public universities receive public funding and manage their own budget, tuition, and admission terms. Nonetheless, the government operates a centralized government organ called the Higher Education Quality Assurance Section (HEQAS), which is in charge of public funding of the institutions and of planning and executing regular inspections for ensuring institutional responsibility and the quality of teaching. In contrast, private universities are under the quality supervision of a government organ called the Standards, Productivity and Innovation Board (SPRING), which defines standards for quality management in private education.

In 2004 charges and complaints emerged about the low level of teaching and low admission terms for students entering private institutions, and in response the government decided to tighten its control of private education and formulated the Private Education Act (PEA), which details its authority on the subject and the standards that private educational institutions must meet, in order to ensure the quality of private education in the country (Lo, 2014).

### 3.1.7 Japan

Japan's system of higher education is comprised of research and teaching universities and technological and vocational universities and colleges, where the absolute majority of the institutions are private. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the Japanese government decided to advance reforms to improve responsibility and quality assurance in local higher education. The reforms focused on improving the quality of teaching and research, forming an autonomous and flexible environment that includes a self-evaluation and supervisory system. In addition, the government advanced an amendment to the Education Act in order to reduce supervision of standards for establishing universities, with the aim of increasing the autonomy and flexibility of the various institutions to reorganize their faculties and study programs. At the same time, the Ministry of Education established the Certified Evaluation and Accreditation (CEA) system of education, research, and management that is charge of evaluating the different institutions.

In the last twenty-five years Japan developed a fairly complex and comprehensive evaluation system that enables internal supervision by the institution or by external professionals that have some relevance for the nature of the institution. This policy of granting considerable autonomy to institutions derives from the strong desire of the Japanese government to allow the system of higher education to adapt itself easily and rapidly to the demands of the global economy (Yamaguchi & Tsukahara, 2016).

In summary, it appears that the global changes that are leaving their mark on systems of higher education around the world encouraged the different countries reviewed above to perform necessary adjustments and changes in order to realize their goals of improving the system of higher education and making it more accessible to the general public, as much as possible. At the same time, it seems that the ways in which this was achieved differed. While some of the countries carried out processes of liberalization and reducing government supervision of institutions of higher education, others chose to increase the level of federal or government supervision.

The European Union, for instance, decided to allow each country freedom of action to promote these goals at will, with the commitment that the regulatory body in charge of the system of higher education would include professionals from outside this system. According to these principles, designated bodies were established in the various European countries (France, Italy, Spain, and Britain) portrayed in this study. In the United States, in contrast, processes of recognition and quality assurance of the system of higher education are carried out by private organizations. These organizations emphasize examination of the country's needs and those of the employment market and connect policymakers with educational leaders in order to provide a response to these needs.

In contrast, other countries were found to increase the level of federal or government supervision of their institutions of higher education, with the goal of adapting them to shifts and changes in the needs and goals of the country and of the system of higher education (respectively). An example is Australia, which decided at the beginning of the previous decade to establish a federal body that would concentrate the activity of the different organizations dealing with the system of higher education, while limiting their degree of freedom. Similarly, other countries in the Far East such as China and Singapore also implemented a policy of considerable supervision of academic institutions operating within their territory, which has tightened in recent years. Then again, Japan began an opposite process of reducing government involvement in the system of higher education and supervision of the various institutions, in the recognition that a more liberal country could help the system of higher education adjust itself easily and rapidly to the demands of the global economy.

### *3.2 Case Studies – Decision making Processes in Israel's Council for Higher Education in Recent Decades*

Members of the Council for Higher Education whose different characteristics were portrayed above were required in recent years to express their views and reach decisions on issues relevant for the Israeli economy, which is subject to various global influences. Therefore, this part will focus on reviewing and analyzing some of these issues that have appeared on the agenda of the CHE in recent years, with the goal of assessing the decision making processes of CHE members. The analysis will be based on media attention to the selected issues as well as on interviews conducted with various academics, some of whom were or are associated with the Council for Higher Education.

#### *3.2.1 Public versus Private Education*

In recent decades the CHE advanced the certification of several private institutions of higher education (Note 9). This process generated strong resistance by the Board of Public Academic Colleges, who claimed that the CHE treats private colleges differently than other public organizations with regard to approval of study programs and recognition of colleges, as it is concerned of intervening in the private market and of being accused of negatively influencing the freedom of occupation. As they see it, CHE decisions are replete with lack of planning and lack of attention to national considerations and needs. Moreover, they expressed the concern that these private institutions will be compelled to accept any candidate (even if not up to academic standards) for financial reasons. The CHE, through the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC), indeed funds only public institutions but supervises all academic institutions operating in Israel. At the same time, supervision of public institutions is more stringent and efficient than that of private institutions, as the former may be exposed to budgetary sanctions if deviating from CHE rules.

#### *3.2.2 Accessibility versus Excellence*

Israel's system of higher education has undergone a considerable process of development from the establishment of the state to the present. During this period, the number of institutions that award academic degrees has grown, with a concurrent increase in the number of undergraduate and graduate (Master's degree and PhD.) students



(Davidovitch & Iram, 2014). As stated, the CHE and the PBC, which are in charge of formulating higher education policy, initiated the reform that led to about a decade of intensive change in the structure of opportunities for acquiring an academic education in Israel. As a result of this reform, Israel's system of higher education changed its profile, and since the early 1990s many colleges were added to the universities, forming a more extensive and open structure of higher education that encompasses a large range of disciplines.

However, this has come at a price. The very rapid rate of increase in Israel's higher education also had negative effects on this system, as the quality of academic teaching and learning began to drop, the government's part in the budgets of the institutions and universities was cut, and the numerical ratio of faculty per students, which was about sixteen students per senior faculty member in the mid-1990s, dropped to about twenty-five students per senior faculty member in the mid-2000s. In addition, the entrance of foreign branches, the opening of nine new private institutions, and the expansion in the number of public colleges, led to strong competition that affected the quality of students and faculty. All these had a negative effect on Israel's system of higher education and generated criticism. This criticism of the quality of higher education and the frequent budget crises (particularly of the universities) led the government to establish a committee that in 2007 recommended ways of improving the state of higher education and promoting regulatory processes for this purpose (Volanski, 2007).

As a result, the rapid development of Israel's system of higher education led to a list of fundamental public debates. The many disagreements pertain, in one way or another, to one central issue: How to connect between academic freedom, expressed by an almost completely free academic "market" that affords access to higher education to all Israel's residents, and regulation of higher education that seeks to maintain its quality while also maintaining access.

Another issue related to the budgeting policy of the various institutions examines the policy applied by the PBC, which allocates budgets to the various academic institutions according to the number of students budgeted in advance in each. A series of interviews conducted on this issue highlighted the claim that this policy preserves the existing disparity between institutions in the geographic periphery and in central Israel. According to the interviewees, students in the periphery have a lower starting point than learners in central Israel and are likely to need more financial support to fund their studies. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to implement an overall differential budgeting policy, not only by discipline (as at present) but rather by the geographical location of the institution, which is associated with socioeconomic aspects of the learners. Implementing such a policy will facilitate a higher level of tuition subsidies for students in the periphery and will considerably help them reduce gaps versus students in central Israel.

### 3.2.3 Research versus Teaching

The PBC's budgeting model is comprised of two elements: research and teaching. However, while the research element relates only to universities, the teaching element relates to both universities and colleges. The model for the teaching element is calculated based on several parameters that are not directly linked to the quality of teaching (Note 10), rather to the size of the institution and the number of students. Indeed, the quality of teaching is probably higher in small courses, however it is also possible to claim that outstanding teachers attract a large number of students, such that it is not reasonable to base the quality of teaching on the small number of learners in each course.

Moreover, while there is a lack of clarity regarding the model for improving teaching and its aims, the budgeting model directed at improving research output is clear, coherent, and generous from a budgetary respect (Volanski, 2012). This model examines Israel's institutions of higher education by different research measures and budgets them accordingly. A university whose faculty members publish more, are cited more, and receive more research grants, will receive more generous funds, and vice versa. Similarly, a faculty member in all budgeted academic institutions whose research activity is more extensive will receive more compensation (research funds, reduced teaching hours, etc.). These circumstances create several distortions:

First of all, faculty members employed at colleges are required to meet similar research demands as university faculty, although the colleges are teaching institutions more than research institutions and their budgeting method is different. Second, emphasizing the exclusivity of the research element in the activity of faculty members in particular and of academic institutions in general, eliminates the justification for the CHE's declared policy regarding the original designation of the colleges as high standard teaching institutions. Third, and maybe most important, the reliance of the PBC's budgeting model on quantitative and short-term research parameters (number of publications, number of citations, impact factor (Note 11) of the journal in which the article was published, and others) is deficient and distorted. This is because faculty members, knowing that they must often present immediate academic output as a condition for promotion and financial compensation, avoid longitudinal

research that might lead to scientific and research breakthroughs, in the knowledge that they are measured by their publications in the last two years. Instead, the current budgeting policy constitutes an incentive for faculty members to promote relatively shallow research that can be concluded in a short period and continue as quickly as possible to the next article, in this way serving as a contractor for writing articles who is compensated on a quantitative basis. Moreover, also including parameters related to the number of citations received by the faculty member's articles and the quality of the journal in which the research is published by impact factor can distort discernment of the faculty's real capabilities and might affect the research quality of universities in general and of research faculty in particular, as these measures are disciplinary and not absolute (differ significantly between disciplines (Note 12)).

Therefore, the CHE would do well to reexamine the budgeting policy implemented at present and act to on one hand form a balance between the teaching incentives and the research incentives. Otherwise, the day will come when Israel's institutions of higher education will all become research hothouses that will contribute only to researchers in the academic ivory tower and eliminate the main purpose of the reform in higher education (1993), which is to provide access to education to all parts of Israeli society. On the other hand, it should change the research-dependent budgeting policy such that it is based on longer time ranges and differential parameters according to the various research disciplines with their unique features.

### 3.2.4 Higher Education in Practice and its Relevance for the Employment Market

As stated, there seems to be a connection between the changes in the labor market supply and the shifts in the demand for higher education, as a need for educated workers in highly sought fields arouses young people's motivation to acquire an education in these fields. On the other hand, a flow of young people to acquire an education in a certain professional branch might develop and expand the extent of employment in it, upon completing their academic training. However, the technological development and rapid changes in the labor market create a type of paradox, as it is precisely those who acquire an education with the aim of becoming integrated in the employment market who might fall victim to this rapid pace of renewal and find themselves outside the labor cycle and irrelevant for the market's needs. Therefore, the system of higher education must constantly renew current knowledge that is relevant for organizations active in the market (Volanski, 2012). Moreover, the CHE must also examine the various needs of the economy at each point in time and direct students to the various academic departments accordingly so that they will accumulate the knowledge and acquire the professions needed by the labor market upon graduation.

A study that examined the policy of the Council for Higher Education with regard to regulating those learning various disciplines attests to a public policy focused exclusively on the short term, which makes do with examining actual circumstances retrospectively and attempting to improve it by directing learners to the various subjects with the aim of providing the needs of the labor market or correcting its known faults in the current given period of time. Nevertheless, this policy contains no attempt to foresee the future and to try and identify future needs and faults that can be predicted by analyzing demographic, technological, cultural, and other trends. Moreover, implementation of this policy is performed by means of a differential budgeting model aimed at increasing or reducing the incentives given to institutions of higher education to accept students in the various disciplines according to the level of budgeting provided for them by the government. At the same time, such a policy is not capable of affecting demand at all as it does not include any incentives for those enrolling to study disciplines it considers preferable (Cohen, 2018).

### 3.2.5 Digital Teaching in Higher Education

The COVID-19 crisis that began to affect the world in general and Israel in particular towards the end of the first quarter of 2020 had a huge price. These tough circumstances obliged both businesses and government authorities to change their regular ways of conduct and embrace more adaptive and efficient courses in order to preserve their constant activity as much as possible. Such adaptive steps did not pass over the system of higher education, which was compelled to find prompt solutions to the challenging reality of a spreading pandemic that prevented continued activity on the various campuses.

A study that examined the development of online teaching in Israel's system of higher education determines that it is the result of needs, constraints, and opportunities emerging in the free market associated with higher education rather than of an organized policy of the CHE (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2020). The various development stages of this teaching pattern were also found to emerge in association with students' needs (Note 13), opportunities for achieving economic and financial benefits by institutions of higher education (Note 14), as well as limitations and constraints imposed on the overall activity in the higher education market as a result of an external element (Note 15).

This conclusion concerning the lack of preparation by the Israeli system of higher education, its characteristic passivity, conservatism, and lack of innovation, and its inclination to maintain the current state of affairs without taking into account the changing reality and the challenges of the future, is nothing new and was uncovered in previous studies that examined its different features (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2015; Cohen, 2018). Moreover, the study conducted by Almog and Almog, which examined the online teaching revolution in Israel's system of higher education, shows that not only was this revolution enforced on the institutions of higher education from outside, rather these institutions intentionally delayed its emergence for various reasons until giving in to present needs and reality constraints formed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Almog & Almog, 2020).

### *3.3 The Council for Higher Education as Perceived by Leaders at the Institutions of Higher Education*

Analysis of the series of interviews conducted in this study shows that the CHE has a prominent political image. Some claim that until a decade ago the CHE was mainly a professional body and the faculty members chosen to serve on it were among Israel's best researchers. However, it appears that in the last decade the CHE is perceived as a political body, with some of its members chosen mainly on a political basis and following the worldview of leaders of higher education and of the various academic institutions. The interviewees claim that at present most of the current CHE members do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to develop higher education, as they were chosen for this position based on political aims related to the interests of the institutions that sent them and their fields of knowledge. In addition, it is claimed that in recent years the Minister of Education (who heads the CHE) has become strongly involved and often manages to enforce his opinion concerning decisions reached, with an emphasis on political considerations that overcome professional considerations. At the same time, the interviewees also voiced another claim that contradicts the above, whereby for many years the CHE was and still is a professional body, despite attempts by several Ministers of Education to lend it a political nature by appointing CHE members with a political outlook identified with that of the minister. This view is in the minority.

Another claim that arises from the interviews conducted is that the CHE grants more weight to universities than to colleges. This is evident in the composition of the CHE, its roles, the budgeting policy, over-focusing on the needs of universities, and operating stricter control and supervision tools regarding colleges versus universities.

## **4. Discussion**

The research findings show that unlike the countries presented above, the CHE's supervisory and regulatory policy regarding Israel's system of higher education has not undergone any significant transition for decades and no attempt is evident to adapt it in some way to the changing global circumstances affecting the various academic personnel and the employment market it seeks to serve. In fact, it is apparent that the CHE is in a state of stagnation, maintaining the current state of affairs, and the shifts in its policy are the result of necessity or outside impact rather than of a preplanned and intentional policy, as evident in the case studies examined in this paper and described below.

Examination of CHE policy with regard to supervision and monitoring of public and budgeted academic institutions versus private institutions shows that the CHE indeed supervises all academic institutions operating in Israel, but the supervision of public institutions is stricter and more efficient than of private institutions, as the former are exposed to budgetary sanctions if they deviate from CHE rules. In addition to the inequality and unfairness of these circumstances, they might lead to a preference for economic and marketing considerations over academic considerations with regard to accepting students and academic faculty to private institutions.

The 1993 reform in higher education led to the establishment of many academic institutions and extended their deployment throughout the country. Examination of the budgeting policy for the various institutions shows that it is based on the number of students studying at each institution, on condition that this does not exceed the budget allocated in advance. The budgeting policy is differential, determined according to the academic department in which the budgeted student is enrolled, such that for a student studying a discipline that has priority and is in demand by the CHE the teaching institution will receive higher subsidies than that received for a student studying a discipline for which there is less demand (according to the national priorities and needs of the economy as defined by the CHE). At the same time, the levels of differential budgeting are uniform for all academic institutions, undistinguished by the economic resilience of the academic institution and the socioeconomic status of its students.

This policy is problematic, as it preserves the existing disparity between institutions in the geographical periphery and those located in central Israel. Therefore, it would have been desirable to design a differential budgeting policy that takes into account the institutions' location and their economic status, in order to reduce the disparities between the academic institutions and between students from the periphery and center.

Such a policy would let economically weak institutions grant their students larger scholarships so that they could focus as much as possible on their studies and not be concerned by subsistence issues. In addition, this policy would let the institutions employ more lecturers, which would help reduce the lecturer-student ratio and improve the quality of teaching in these institutions. In this way, the CHE could realize in practice the vision of those who devised the original reform, which sought to provide access to higher education, with the aim of reducing social gaps and facilitating the integration of both values of accessibility and academic excellence.

The research findings attest to distortions in the PBC's budgeting model with regard to encouraging research and teaching. First of all, the budgeting model examines the universities and determines their budget according to measures of research and teaching quality, while the colleges are budgeted only by measures of teaching quality. Nevertheless, the academic faculty at all funded academic institutions, including the colleges, are tested and promoted based on research quality measures (publications, citations, research grants) while the teaching element is relatively negligible, although the CHE considers colleges teaching institutions and not research institutions. Secondly, the teaching element included in the budgeting model is calculated by several parameters that are not directly associated with the quality of teaching and in some even contrary to it.

Moreover, the budgeting model was found to be based on short-term parameters that encourage quantity rather than quality, create considerable discrepancies between faculty members in different disciplines, and in fact eliminate incentives for conducting long-term research with global significance. Therefore, the conclusions of the study call for updating the budgeting model, adapting it to the various institutions and research disciplines, and balancing the teaching incentives with the research incentives in order to promote both aims of Israel's higher education: research and teaching.

There is no dispute that one of the goals of higher education is to provide the needs of the economy and of society that are dependent on expert professionals in their respective fields. For this reason, there is a reciprocal relationship between the system of higher education and the employment market. Meeting the demands of the labor market as well as shaping it in advance according to various forecasts related to sociodemographic, technological, and global processes, require CHE and PBC policymakers to regulate the differential budgeting policy accordingly. This will expand or reduce the number of learners in the different disciplines to fit the shortage and excess of current and anticipated professionals in the current and future labor market (respectively).

The research findings indicate that the currently implemented policy is aimed only at the short term and makes do with examining reality retrospectively and with attempts to improve it. It may be assumed that a more effective policy could have led to significant changes in the study programs at the different institutions, and hence also in the number, qualities, and skills of the teaching faculty. Such a course of action is politically complex, which detracts from its feasibility, as it is only reasonable that CHE members who are representatives of the academic institutions or serve there as faculty themselves will not promote a real revolution in the field of higher education, as it might harm them, their colleagues, or their institution. Therefore, they will make do with formulating such an incremental policy that only changes the current situation slightly and that is incapable of initiating changes that will adapt the system of higher education to the demands of the future labor market.

The research findings indicate, as stated, that the development of online teaching in Israel's system of higher education and its recent expansion with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic is a result of needs, constraints, and opportunities raised by the free market with regard to higher education. Moreover, not only was the online teaching revolution forced on institutions of higher education from outside rather than being the result of an organized and planned CHE policy, these institutions also delayed the emergence of this revolution for their own considerations and interests.

The role of the CHE is to anticipate the future and to plan changes in the teaching methods in advance according to the technological changes occurring in the global world, which are affecting the different fields of the economy and of society, including higher education. The CHE as a supervisory and path setting entity should neutralize delays and hesitations of the academic institutions in embracing advanced and innovative teaching methods and also help and guide them in advancing these inevitable processes. Otherwise, the Israeli system of higher education will remain archaic and outdated both in absolute terms and compared to the systems of higher education in developed countries. Alternately, these development processes will ultimately be developed at top speed under pressure of time and circumstantial needs, while exposing many faults and mishaps stemming from lack of readiness and advance planning, as happened regrettably when the COVID-19 pandemic appeared.

#### *4.1 Characterization of CHE Members*

As we see it, in order for the system of higher education to be managed professionally, with no political or other bias, the profile of CHE members should be characterized by several objective parameters: First of all, it is

necessary to find and select professionals from the field of higher education who engage in research on teaching and learning methods and development of performance measures in academia, unrelated to their institutional affiliation. Secondly, before being elected the committee member must show proven experience in management and academic leadership. Third, the committee member must be familiar with Israel's system of higher education from a wide perspective and in a comparative view of systems of higher education in different countries. Finally, the committee member must commit to devoting significant and long-term time to the promotion of higher education in Israel and not see it only as a representative role. Moreover, he must maintain the rules of ethics, confidentiality, and operate regularly following matter-of-face considerations only and in the public good, even in cases when his actions and decisions might contradict his personal interests or those of the academic institution to which he belongs. Another recommendation is related to the relatively older average age of CHE members and calls for reducing the average age. A younger generation of academics will probably be more updated and connected to changes occurring the world on one hand and open to carrying out the necessary changes on the other.

CHE members chosen according to the proposed profile will be able to contribute significantly to promoting the system of higher education and to transforming it from a bureaucratic, slow, reactive agency, into a dynamic, efficient, and fast-responding one. System that plans years in advance and stimulates changes in the system of higher education, with the aim of adapting it in advance to the present and future needs of society and of the economy, affected by technological, sociodemographic, and economic shifts in Israel and around the world.

In addition, it is necessary to establish professional committees from the different fields of knowledge that will operate beside the CHE and their role will be to advise it on academic issues related to the discipline for which the CHE is required to reach a decision (approval of study programs, effecting changes in existing programs, opening study tracks, approving programs for advanced studies, etc.). The professional committees will be manned by senior academics in their field, unrelated to their institutional affiliation and political preference.

## 5. Conclusions

This study examined the relevance of Israel's Council for Higher Education as a regulatory agency established over sixty years ago with the aim of setting out Israel's higher education policy. The study attempts to follow the decision making processes of CHE members in the three last councils (from 2002-2020), in a period characterized by accelerated global change that had a significant economic and social impact. The study focuses on five topics that constitute case studies for the need for the CHE from a perspective of time. These topics are the core of the academic system's activity: research and teaching, accessibility and excellence, public education and private education, development of online teaching, and the contribution of the system of higher education to the employment market.

The research literature on the system of higher education (with a comparison between Israel and the rest of the world), data analysis of the features of CHE members in the last decade, and a series of interviews with senior academics, indicate that the CHE is perceived as a bureaucratic agency. Members of the CHE are representatives of academic institutions, researchers in a variety of fields, and in most cases not proficient in research on higher education. The CHE is not perceived as a professional organ that leads processes of innovation and change by professionals who are researchers of higher education, performance measures in higher education, academic teaching and learning, and the association between academia and the field. In addition, the CHE is perceived as an organ that reacts to current events and challenges as well as to changing circumstances, instead of shaping them to begin with. Moreover, the CHE's policy is perceived as short-sighted and affected by various foreign interests that delay achievement of the declared aim to promote high standard, innovative, and accessible research and teaching processes for the good of the economy and of society.

The uniqueness of this study is that it is a pioneer study, the first to examine the contribution of Israel's CHE to the development of local higher education. The research conclusions can help formulate a new model that will make it possible to shape and implement an efficient and updated public policy to promote Israel's system of higher education and respond to timely needs. Similar to that implemented in other countries in the world, there is room to examine the implementation of a hybrid model that combines liberalization and regulation. This model lets institutions of higher education develop independently while reducing government supervision, and also lets the regulatory agency in charge of this system regulate their activity through incentives and limitations, while identifying market faults it defines. These market faults can include harm to the quality of teaching, inability of population groups to become integrated in the system of higher education due to various barriers (financial, cultural, physical, geographic, religious, etc.), decline of research versus development of teaching or vice versa, excessively extensive training of graduates in professions of which there is an excess in the

employment market or the opposite, not embracing advanced teaching technologies due to intra-institutional considerations that might hamper the quality and availability of teaching, and more. Such a regulatory agency will include a list of academic experts from the field of higher education that have proven experience in the fields of academic research and teaching, in order to separate the management of Israel's system of higher education from politics and bureaucracy.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## Notes

Note 1. Until 1993 the law forbade establishment of non-research academic schools in Israel, however in that year then Minister of Education Amnon Rubinstein decided on a reform in higher education and changed the law. From 1993 to the present, dozens of colleges were established, of which the large majority offer academic study tracks for a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree in the subjects taught at the different universities.

Note 2. According to the Council for Higher Education Law of 1958.

Note 3. Sources: CHE website, <https://che.org.il> and the Council for Higher Education Law.

Note 4. UKCES is both a non-departmental public body (NCPB) and a company limited by guarantee (UKCES, Our Governance, date retrieved: 24 January 2016).

Note 5. Called the "Bologna Process".

Note 6. Adkit, (2014). Higher education - regulatory models in the world (30.1.2014) [http://www.adkit.co.il/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAj9iBBhCJARIsAE9qRtAPj-oXTGCUG6JDJXy2ex\\_c8PQtZEOWYxowgbe7ZRAaLgeTSdnHL6kaAiwyEALw\\_wcB](http://www.adkit.co.il/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAj9iBBhCJARIsAE9qRtAPj-oXTGCUG6JDJXy2ex_c8PQtZEOWYxowgbe7ZRAaLgeTSdnHL6kaAiwyEALw_wcB)

Note 7. About forty universities and the rest private colleges.

Note 8. Such as providing a response to employers' needs while focusing on areas in which a lack of skills is felt, and taking into account internal needs of the academic institutions themselves, for instance a decline in students' achievements or a drop in enrollment, etc.

Note 9. Such as the academic track in the Michlala Leminal in 1986, the Netanya Academic College, and the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya in 1998, the Academic Center of Law and Science in 2001, and the Ono Academic College in 2006.

Note 10. Number of students by discipline according to defined keys, budget rated by discipline according to degree level, efficiency coefficient (utilization), student-faculty ratio coefficient (for the entire institution).

Note 11. The journal's impact factor is the ratio between the total number of articles published over two years in the journal and the total number of times these articles were cited by subsequent publications in the third year.

Note 12. It is well known that the impact factor of natural sciences and medical journals (derived, as stated, from the journal's number of citations) is visibly higher than that of journals in the social sciences and humanities.

Note 13. The need to acquire education by distance learning among those limited by place and time.

Note 14. The readiness of the various institutions of higher education to promote online teaching projects in light of calls published by the CHE and in return for grants and financial support for this purpose.

Note 15. The COVID-19 pandemic, which interrupted the activity of the system of higher education in its frontal format and required a full transition to online teaching.

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