

Science Policy

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[Regional focus](#)
[Global Observatory or Policy Instruments](#)
[Centre for South-South Cooperation](#)
[Gender issues](#)
[Science popularization](#)

[Science Governance](#)

[Science Legislation](#)

[University-Industry Partnerships](#)

[Prospective Studies](#)

Interview of Professor Ruth Arnon



■ Q2 - What challenges does higher education face in terms of training scientists and engineers?

The scientific and engineering population is ageing and there is a gap between the predicted demand for scientists and engineers – stemming from economic growth and the retirement of personnel – and the predicted supply of new graduates. In Israel, only 25% of bachelor's degrees are obtained in the field of natural sciences and technology. This compares with 40% in the Republic of Korea and a ratio of about 30% in most Western countries. Were this trend to continue, it might close the positive technological gap that exists between Israel and its competitors, or even reverse it.

The ageing of scientists and engineers is already apparent in some fields. For example, about three-quarters of researchers in the physical sciences are over the age of 50. The situation is even worse when it comes to practical engineers and technicians.

According to estimates by the Samuel Neaman Institute for National Policy Research, there is a need for about 7000 new engineers each year, with more than half of these (3 600) required simply to replace the retirees. Yet, just 4 906 bachelor's degrees were awarded in engineering and architecture in 2008/2009 by the universities and other higher-education institutions in Israel (see Table 1). As for technical engineers and technicians, the predicted number of retirees alone is estimated at 12 000 and the number of graduates in these fields at about 8 000.

■ Q3 - What percentage of 18-25 year-olds attend university in Israel?

One-fifth (19.8%) of the 21–28-year age cohort was enrolled in academic institutions in 2009/2010, including the Open University. We have used this age cohort rather than that for 18–25-year olds due to the compulsory military service at age 18.

■ Q4 - The government has launched a policy to increase

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and recognition of the unique qualities and needs of the particular sector, maintenance of a high academic standard and choice of programmes leading to a high likelihood of employment. Financial support of the programmes is included in the multi-year agreement for higher education reform between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education reached in 2010.

[BACK - MAIN - NEXT](#)

[Back to top](#)

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