The Impact of the COVID 19 Pandemic on Young Researchers
Activity Overview

The COVID-19 crisis has taken a disproportionate toll on the most vulnerable communities within our academic system: research students, post-doctoral scholars, and untenured faculty. The challenges are particularly dire for those caring for young children, as they aggravate gender disparities. Over the past months, the Israel Young Academy has taken an active role in attempting to alleviate some of the challenges faced by these groups.

1. In June 2020, the IYA organized a symposium in support of Israeli post-docs abroad. The symposium was attended by leading members of Israeli academia, including the presidents of eight research universities, over thirty deans, and more than 400 post-doctoral scholars from around the world. The symposium was followed by a survey, which was filled by 465 Israeli post-docs in Israel and abroad. The survey's findings, which painted a dire picture, were distributed among the heads of Israeli academia and university presidents, paving the way for a discussion of the challenges based on quantitative data.
2. In the wake of the symposium and the survey, and following subsequent discussions between the IYA and multiple stakeholders inside and outside of academia, the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the Ministry of Science and Technology and the country’s academic institutions provided more than 100 emergency fellowships to help scholars complete their post-doctoral work, primarily by enabling them to continue and complete their post-doctoral research period in Israel.

3. The coronavirus crisis also led to the development of a workshop for mentoring and developing soft skills, led by Prof. Liad Mudrik of the IYA and in collaboration with Fulbright Israel. The workshop consisted of eight online meetings carried out over the course of four months. Topics included such issues as correct time management, preparing successful academic presentations, networking and academic etiquette, maintaining wellbeing, and establishing peer-groups. Each meeting was attended by over 300 participants on average, and the recordings, which are available online on the IYA and Fullbright’s Facebook pages, have been viewed by several hundreds more.
4. Another way in which the IYA has sought to contribute during the coronavirus crisis was by accompanying and encouraging internal discussions at Israel's academic institutions about the effects of the crisis on the work of young scholars facing hiring and promotion procedures. It is to be expected that candidate files will be leaner than usual as a result of the crisis. We also anticipate that, due to the decreased exposure of their work combined with the unusual career path of completing their research in Israel,
candidates may have trouble securing letters of recommendation. Israel’s research institutions will need to develop new and creative ways of identifying excellence and to confront the long-term implications of the crisis with regard to research output. Such implications will still be felt even after the crisis is over.

5. To strengthen ties between post-doctoral scholars and the Israeli academy, the IYA has sought to facilitate platforms to help post-doctoral scholars form connections and research alliances, and in particular to assist scholars looking for Israeli research groups where they might complete their research. Among other initiatives, we have held discipline-based introductory events, in which post-doctoral scholars have informally presented their research to senior faculty members.

6. Over the summer, the IYA’s Humanities Committee created a survey aimed to assess the particular challenges facing humanities scholars during the pandemic. The survey revealed that the closing of libraries presents a serious obstacle to young scholars, both by limiting their access to research materials and by depriving them of a dedicated workspace. Following the findings of the survey, we have produced a brochure collating information about library services available to humanities scholars during the crisis, and we have also initiated dialogue with the libraries about the creation of open-air workspaces.
After nearly a year of the coronavirus pandemic, and with the crisis yet to be resolved, we are able to report with some satisfaction that IYA’s activities have made Israel’s academic leaders aware of the challenges created by the crisis, and that our initiatives have helped to make these challenges somewhat easier for young scholars and post-doctoral researchers to cope with. Nevertheless, the effects that the crisis will have on future candidacy files remains a challenge that will need to be confronted by Israel’s academy and by IYA itself. The IYA will continue to advocate in support of young researchers during these challenging times.