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Cultural Framework and Objective Obstacles of Arab Students in Two Public Colleges in Israel

NITZA DAVIDOVITCH, DAN SOEN
and MICHAL KOLAN

This article presents the results of a survey of 459 Jewish and Arab students at two public colleges in Israel in 2005. The study aimed at gaining understanding of Arab students' access to higher education in comparison to access of Jewish students by the objective obstacles to such access as reflected in the admission profiles and socio-economic background of Jewish and Arab students at two public colleges. Analyses indicated that these academic campuses constitute a site of encounter for two very different population groups, a fact that has significant implications for access and admission policies, and student aid programs. The findings of this study are the first step in further consideration of issues relating to equal opportunities and access to higher education for Arab students, and shed light on potential means for reducing the gaps between Arab students and their Jewish counterparts.

Introduction: Israel's Changing Higher Education System

Many changes have occurred in higher education in Israel since the 1990s, corresponding to the changing aims of the institutions of higher education in Israel (Ayalon and Yogeve, 2002; Volensky, 2005). Social changes directed toward greater equality and democratization in higher education, in Israel and worldwide (Yaoz and Iram, 1987; Volensky, 2005), opened the gates of universities to population groups who had never previously been candidates for higher education.

Between 1992 and 2002, the Commission of Higher Education certified thirty new colleges as a means for social equality and justice by promoting low socio-economic status (SES) populations and increasing access to higher education for the Arab sector (Volensky, 2005, p. 342). In this period, the average growth rate of universities and colleges was 3.6 percent and 11.9 percent, respectively (Volensky, 2005, p. 340). In this period, universities doubled the number of enrolled students in response (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2002b, p. 19), and the number of students at regional colleges also increased. In 2005, over one half of all undergraduate students in Israel were enrolled in various academic colleges.

This study examines the admission profiles and socio-economic background of Jewish and Arab students at two public colleges in Israel to discover whether students from these two groups enter higher education from a similar starting point, or whether admission profiles and socio-economic backgrounds reflect objective obstacles to inclusion in higher education. Two regional colleges were selected, which were designed to satisfy predominantly social needs and to promote social equality and justice (Yisraeli, 1997; Budget and Planning Committee, 1997).

Participation in Higher Education of the Arab Sector in Israel

Higher education is one of the most important means of socio-economic mobility. It is considered a component of “human capital” and an essential element in development and growth processes of individuals and societies (Sagi, Steinberg and Pahiraladin, 2002).

In contrast to Jewish society in Israel, which was defined as a modern society from the onset, Arab society after the War of Independence was mainly a rural, traditional population with limited access to education services. On the eve of the War of Independence, the public Arab education system included only thirty percent of school-aged children (Tibawi, 1956, p. 270). Since the establishment of the state and the application of the Mandatory Education Law to the entire population (1948–1990), the number of pupils in the public Arab education system increased from 12,000 to approximately 220,000 (Mazawi, 1997, p. 171). Between 1990 and 2003, this system grew by seventy percent, compared with a growth rate of a mere nineteen percent in the Jewish sector (Administration of Economics and Budgets, 2004, p. 58). A change for the better was indicated in the early twenty-first century, when the relative weight of Arab students among the general population of undergraduate students exceeded the “obstacle” of ten percent. Between 1990 and 2001, the participation of the Arab population in higher education increased by 220 percent while the general population of students grew by a mere 125 percent in the corresponding period (Budget and Planning Committee, 2003, p. 146). Nationality is a major factor that contributed to the emerging increase in recent years in the number of Arab students who acquire higher education. Economic power of land ownership and its value in terms of social stratification in Arab society have declined, leading to the nationalization of the conceptions of education and educational attainment (Mazawi, 1997, p. 172). Since education and educational attainments are resources that cannot be expropriated, they are perceived by Arabs in Israel as a major instrument in their war on the *Sumud*, their future existence in Israel as a collective of defined national identity and roots. Thus, a middle-class has developed among this population, whose status stems mainly from its ability to provide services of professional specialization, based on educational attainment (Mazawi, 1997, p. 172).

Nonetheless, the ratio of Jewish students per 1,000 Jewish residents soared from 4.2 in 1957, to 20.6 in 1996. Although the ratio of Arab students increased significantly, it remained much lower than the ratio of Jewish students and rose from 0 per 1,000 residents in 1957, to 6.3 per 1000 residents in 1996 (Al-Haj, 1996).

Of the four factors cited (Benziman, 2002) for the under-representation of Arab students in the higher education, the first factor concerns differences in the standard of high school studies between the Jewish and Arab sectors.

Although the educational participation rate in Israel for the fifteen–eighteen-year-old age group is higher than the average in OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries (Administration of Economics and Budgets, 2004), there is a large difference in high school participation rates of the Jewish and Arab sectors. In the Jewish sector, the participation rate in 2003 was 98.8 percent, while in the Arab sector it was 88.8 percent (Administration of Economics and Budgets, 2004, p. 68). Although both sectors showed a large increase in participation rates over time (from 79.5 percent the Jewish sector and 51.3 percent in the Arab sector in 1979), the gap remains great and is partially explained by the differences in drop-out rates in both sectors (4.6 percent and 9.1 percent in the Jewish and Arab sectors, respectively in 2002).

The differences between the sectors are also reflected in the percentage of pupils who sit for Bagrut examinations. In the recent decade, there has been a sharp increase in the percentage of high school pupils in this age group who sit for Bagrut matriculation exams (from fifty-two percent of all pupils in 1990, to seventy-one percent in 2002) (Administration of Economics and Budgets, 2004, p. 73). Nonetheless, the gap between the two sectors remains large. In 2002, seventy-five percent of all Jewish pupils sat for Bagrut exams, while only sixty-five percent in the Arab sector did so (Administration of Economics and Budgets, 2004).

The ratio of pupils eligible for a Bagrut certificate in this age group also increased in the recent decade yet the difference between the two sectors remains large. In 2002, fifty-two percent of the members of this age group in the Jewish sector were eligible for a Bagrut certificate while only thirty-four percent of the Arab pupils in this age group were similarly eligible.

Moreover, a Bagrut certificate on its own does not guarantee any right of admission or option to institutions of higher learning in Israel. Basic admission requirements for universities are at least a four-point English Bagrut exam and at least a three-point Bagrut exam in math. In 2003, only 84.6 percent of all the pupils eligible for a Bagrut certificate met these requirements, with a large difference between the Jewish and Arab sectors (Svirski and Atkin, 2004, p. 11): 86.7 percent, 71.8 percent, and 66.4 percent for the Jewish sector, Arab sector, and Druze sector, respectively.

This may be traced to achievements in elementary and junior high schools, where the scholastic achievements of Arab pupils in math, English, science and technology, are much lower than those of the Jewish pupils. For example, the average grade of Jewish pupils in the eighth grade is seventy-five, which is almost twice as high as the average in the Arab sector (forty).

Since the 1970s, under pressure by institutions of higher education, a psychometric exam was introduced as a criterion for the selection and admittance of students to universities, in addition to applicants' achievements reflected in their Bagrut certificates. However, arguments were voiced against discrimination created by the psychometric exams against socio-economically deprived groups in Israel. Arab spokespersons argued that the translation of the test into Arabic was not always comprehensible to Arab pupils; that the verbal reasoning section in the psychometric tests was based on literary Arabic, while the pupils' everyday language is spoken Arabic, which is very different from literary Arabic; and that while mathematics is studied at Arab schools based on Hebrew-language textbooks, this section in the psychometric test is in Arabic (Volensky, 2005, pp. 235–236). Based on a report prepared in 2004 by Musawa, the Center for Rights of Arab Citizens, Arabs constituted 15.1 percent of all candidates who applied to institutions of higher education in 2003. Their weight among candidates whose applications were rejected was twice as large, 29.6 percent (Barhoum, 2004). Furthermore, the percentage of applications from Arab students living in twenty-one various villages was more than twice the national average rejection rate, which was 23.7 percent. The rejection rate in Jewish towns did not exceed thirty percent, while the rejection rate in several Arab towns was as high as sixty percent. In other words, in recent years, the tendency of individuals from the Arab sector to acquire higher education has significantly increased, yet they still encounter considerable problems.

Another factor that works against increasing participation rates of Arabs in higher education are the problems Arab graduates encounter in finding appropriate

employment (Raly, 2003). Arab graduates encounter obstacles in finding appropriate employment after graduation, and as a result, many young Arabs doubt the cost-effectiveness of higher education at all. In Israel the situation is that the higher the educational attainment of an Arab citizen, the smaller his chances of finding a job that is appropriate for his skills (Israel Institute for Democracy, no date). This is highlighted by civil service employment data by sector: for example, in 1995, out of 641 senior officials in government companies, only three were Arabs and out of 1,059 members of boards of government companies, only fifteen were Arabs (Israel Institute for Democracy, no date). In 2000, out of 400 employees of the Ministry of the Environment, only ten were Arabs; out of 27,330 employees of the Ministry of health, only 1,731 were Arabs; out of 150 employees of the Ministry of Internal Security, only one was an Arab; out of 300 employees of the Ministry of Construction and Housing, three were Arabs; out of 2,700 employees of the Ministry of Education, 118 were Arabs; out of 180 employees of the Ministry of Communications, not even one employee was an Arab; this is also the situation at Ben Gurion Airport. Out of 445 judges, only nineteen were Arabs, and out of 5,999 members of university faculties, only fifty were Arabs (Soen, 2003, p. 379).

Other factors that stunt growing participation rates of Arab students in higher education institutions include difficulties adjusting to the educational settings in terms of differences in language, culture, and financial barriers. Moreover, universities and colleges have few support systems designed to facilitate Arab students' integration in academic institutions.

The percentage of non-Jewish students in Israel's institutions of higher education is much lower than their weight in the population, but it is higher in universities than in colleges (Soen and Davidovitch, 2004). For example, non-Jewish students constituted 9.0 percent of the total student population in universities in 2000, but only 6.1 percent in colleges that year (CBS, 2002b, pp. 17, 19).

The variance between colleges is also very high. In some colleges, Arab students constitute a large percentage of the student body. For example, at the Academic College of Zfat, half of the students are Arabs; at the Academic College of Western Galilee over forty percent of the students are Arabs. In contrast, at other colleges, the percentage of Arab students is much lower (one percentage or less) (Davidovitch, Soen and Kolan, 2006). At the time of this study, Arab students constituted a small minority of only 1.2 percent of all students at the Academic College of Judea and Samaria. The CBS data indicate that the potential for Arabs to increase their participation rate in institutions of higher education in the north district will increase over time, due to the demographic profile of this district, in which Arabs constitute the majority (CBS, 2002b, pp. 2–28). Moreover, it is estimated that due to the increasing weight of Bagrut certificate holders among young Arabs, their demand for higher education in general will grow. Consequently, also due to the increasing entry of young Arab females into higher education, their relative weight in the national student body can be expected to increase.

Rationale of the Study

Access to higher education requires a broad perception of systemic openness, available information on universities and colleges, the conditions of study, and the ability to meet the financial, environmental and academic conditions of the colleges and

universities. Due to the competition among students, caused by the limited capacity of institutions of higher education, individuals with specific attributes have a greater chance of success. In this context, two classes of attributes affect each other: individual attributes (personal economic status, previous scholastic achievements, etc.) and collective attributes such as ethnic origin and town of residence (Shay, 1993). This study seeks to explore and compare Jewish and Arab students in terms of these sets of attributes which are thought to significantly affect admission to and persistence in academic studies.

Aim of the Study

This study seeks to explore whether a window of opportunity has effectively emerged for Arab students in the two colleges studied in light of official Council for Higher Education (CHE) policy to expand access to higher education (Hershkovitz, 2000; Ratner, 2002).

The study compared two groups of students – Arab and Jewish students – at two public college campuses in Israel, with specific attention to factors that contribute to inclusion and success in higher education. Based on CBS data, the socio-economic profile of students at colleges is, on average, significantly lower than that of university students. In view of this reality, the research team proposed the following research questions:

- i. Are there any differences in the individual attributes of Arab and Jewish students, and if so, what are they?
- ii. Are there any differences in the economic-family attributes of the parents of Jewish students and Arab students, and if so, what are they?
- iii. Are there any differences in the application profiles (psychometric scores, Bagrut average) of Arab and Jewish students, and if so, what are they?

The answers to these questions should provide an answer to the main research question concerning the objective obstacles to implementation of Council for Higher Education policy to establish public colleges in Israel as a “window of opportunity” for the country’s Arab population.

The hypotheses of this study are:

- i. Findings of the individual attributes of Arab students will show that their socio-economic profile is significantly lower than that of Jewish students, although the socio-economic profile of Jewish students at the two colleges is also lower than the national average.
- ii. The findings of the socio-economic attributes of the Arab students will show:
 - A greater percentage of Arab students hold a job while attending college, compared with Jewish students;
 - Due to the traditional structure of Arab families, the percentage of female Arab students is lower than that of female Jewish students.
- iii. Findings based on the application profiles (psychometric scores and Bagrut averages) of Arab students will show that their basic application profiles are significantly different from those of Jewish students: while the average Bagrut grade of Arab students is higher than that of Jewish students, their average

psychometric scores, taking into consideration all sections of the exam, are lower, and impede their admittance.

Research Method and Tools

The study was conducted at two public colleges in Israel. Questionnaires were distributed to Arab and Jewish students at both colleges.

In this study, 85 Arab students, constituting 97.7 percent of all Arab students attending the College of Judea and Samaria, and 140 Arab students attending the College of Western Galilee, constituting 30.4 percent of all Arab students in this institution's academic division participated in this study. In addition, 97 Jewish students from the College of Judea and Samaria and 137 Jewish students from the College of Western Galilee were sampled. A total of 459 questionnaires were distributed to students: 225 to Arab students and 234 to Jewish students.

We used a questionnaire based on the study by Davidovitch (2004). The questionnaire contained items relating to students' individual and financial background (gender, age, marital status, employment status), items relating to students' parents' family-economic situation (financial status of family, source of financing tuition, parents' educations, family size), and attributes relating to students' academic background (Bagrut average, psychometric score).

Findings and Discussion

It is accepted that individuals with certain attributes have a greater chance of success in higher education. Specifically, two classes of attributes interact and impact academic success: individual attributes (personal economic status, previous scholastic achievements, etc.) and collective attributes such as ethnic origin and town of residence (Shay, 1993). This study sought to explore and compare Jewish and Arab students in terms of these sets of attributes which are thought to significantly affect admittance to, and persistence in, academic studies.

In general, the study found that the individual and collective attributes of Arab students are lower than those of the Jewish population. This finding highlights the objective obstacles facing Arab applicants and students of higher education. As noted above, the main research question on which the research team focused was whether a genuine window of opportunity opened up for Arab students at the two colleges investigated. To arrive at a conclusion regarding this question, we explored three dimensions:

The first dimension related to differences in the individual attributes of Arab and Jewish students. Gender data indicated that female students constitute the majority of both Jewish and Arab students (fifty-eight percent of all Arab students and approximately sixty-six percent of all Jewish students). In contrast to the College of Western Galilee, the College of Judea and Samaria has several faculties in which male students constitute the absolute majority. In terms of age, the mean age of Arab students is lower than the mean age of Jewish students.

The second dimension concerned the socio-economic attributes of students' families of origin. While the mean household income of families of Jewish students is more or less equal to the national average income (which defines students' profiles as low-medium), the household income of Arab students is below average (low). This

difference is exacerbated in view of the differences in family size in both groups: 2.37 and 5.73 among Jewish and Arab students, respectively.

Educational profiles also reflect great differences between the parents of both groups of students. Although the educational profile of the parents of both groups of students is low, a great difference existed in educational attainments of parents, in favor of the parents of Jewish students. Approximately thirty-four percent of the fathers of Arab students (compared with ten percent of the fathers of Jewish students) had elementary education. Only slightly less than fifteen percent of the fathers of Arab students (compared to approximately thirty percent of the fathers of Jewish students) had academic education.

The third dimension concerned the application profiles of Arab students and Jewish students. An analysis of the data points to important findings. First, the mean grade of Arab students who were eligible for a Bagrut certificate (91.7) was much higher than the mean grade of their Jewish counterparts (86.3 percent). Second, among students who submitted a psychometric score with their applications, the mean psychometric score among Jewish college students (537.5) was much higher than that of Arab college students (471.2).

These findings confirm several but not all of the study's hypotheses.

The first hypothesis, that predicted that the socio-economic profile of Arab students would be significantly lower than that of their Jewish counterparts, was fully confirmed. This is also true of the third hypothesis that predicted that the Bagrut scores of Arab students would be higher, and their psychometric scores would be lower than those of their Jewish counterparts. In contrast, the second hypothesis that predicted a higher percentage of employed students and a lower percentage of female students among Arab students was not confirmed.

In view of the findings presented, it appears that the colleges have indeed opened a window of opportunity for Arab students. We may assume that, due to their academic starting point, a considerable portion of this group would have been precluded from attending higher education in the absence of the liberal admittance policies of the colleges. This is also true with regard to their more limited socio-economic resources. We may assume that the relatively inexpensive option of living in student dormitories at the College of Judea and Samaria, and the relatively convenient option of daily travel to the College of Western Galilee without being forced to rent an apartment and pay monthly rent while attending the College, may have encouraged the applications of Arab students.

However, the findings of this study highlight several areas in which Arab students face objective obstacles in gaining access to and succeeding in higher education institutions. First, the majority of Arab female students are concentrated in teaching (in the college of Western Galilee) and in humanities and social sciences (in the College of Judea and Samaria, which has no faculty of education). Despite the broad array of academic programs available, female Arab students do not make use of the opportunity and concentrate on traditional "female" subjects, due to the influence of the traditional family structure in Arab society.

Second, the significant age difference between Arab and Jewish students highlights the need for institutions to consider the objective difficulties of students that stem from their relative immaturity. Higher education in Israel has traditionally been geared to older students; *i.e.*, students who have completed their military service, or have traveled abroad extensively. Opening the higher education system to new populations such as

the Arab population must take into account the fact that Arab students apply directly after completing their high school studies. The disparity in age and maturity affects their preparedness for the challenges of academic studies, a point which institutions of higher education must take into account in designing admission policies that are designed to enhance access of the Arab population to higher education.

Third, Arab students have unequal access to sources of financial aid. Israelis who complete their military service, in contrast, receive a release grant and have access to numerous scholarship and financial aid programs. Interestingly, despite the disparity in access to publicly-funded scholarships, and despite the disparity in the socio-economic status of Arab and Jewish students, Arab students receive more financial support from their families than Jewish students. This is true despite the fact that Arab households are larger, which implies that parents financially support a greater number of children who attend higher education institutions, and are less affluent.

Fourth, admission profiles of Arab and Jewish students at the two colleges indicate a disparity between the high school education systems of both sectors. Arab students enter higher education with less academic preparation, a fact which constitutes yet another obstacle in their attempt to compete with their Jewish counterparts.

Finally, the higher education system in Israel is geared to a Hebrew-speaking student body whose mentality is far removed from a traditional village mindset. Language and mentality differences establish yet another obstacle for Arab students. Numerous studies have been conducted on the correlation between variables related to culture and academic success (Biggs, 1976; Lerner, 2000; Silver and Silver, 1997). According to scholars who study Arab students' experience in Israel, the encounter with the reality on university and college campuses is not a simple one. When Arab students enter the higher education system, they are exposed to different teaching methods and language that is not their native language, and of which they frequently have a poor command (Bashi and Tusia-Cohen, 1994); not only do they encounter a culture with very different values, this is the culture of the majority group. As a result, their own sense of marginality and alienation of their own culture is intensified (Layish, 1992). It is a true culture shock.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that by their lenient and flexible admission policies, newly established public colleges in Israel are taking steps to achieve the social target defined by the Commission of Higher Education in its resolution on affirmative action in the admittance policy for Arab students. Nonetheless, steps should be taken to increase the share of students from the Arab sectors in academic settings, to bridge the economic gaps between the two groups, to reinforce a supportive social-academic climate and support in performing academic tasks, and sensitivity to their religious feelings. There is a need for affirmative action in the admittance requirements of academic institutions, in reinforcing pre-academic programs that prepare students for academic studies, and offering financial aid to help Arab students succeed in academic studies.

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