



# Integration of Young Ethiopian Israelis into Higher Education: Contributing Factors and Barriers

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# Abstract

## Background

The number of Ethiopian-Israeli students in higher education in Israel increased considerably between 2000 and 2016, but their representation remains low in proportion to their percentage in the general population. This low percentage is a reflection of the barriers facing many Ethiopian-Israelis as they enter into higher education, such as a low percentage of eligibility for matriculation meeting university prerequisites and a low average score on the psychometric exam. The government program to integrate Ethiopian-Israelis into society and the Council for Higher Education are promoting the "Program to Increase Access to Higher Education for Ethiopian-Israelis", which seeks to regulate and improve the services currently provided to Ethiopian-Israeli students. In 2017, the Bader Philanthropies commissioned Myers-JDC-Brookdale to examine this issue.

## Goal

To learn how Ethiopian-Israeli students perceive successful integration into academic studies, what factors have helped or impeded them in achieving this success and what strategies are recommended to promote better integration.

## Method

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with Ethiopian-Israeli students, who had studied for at least one year in a higher education institutions and three interviews were conducted with directors of programs to promote the integration of Ethiopian-Israelis into higher education.

## Findings

The interviewees perceived successful integration as a combination of academic success and success in other aspects, particularly in the social aspect and in the sense of belonging. Successful integration into higher education has many causes, such as the formal and informal support provided to the students, and personal characteristics that motivate them to succeed and advance. Family

members, particularly parents, play a central role in choosing, and succeeding in, higher education. However, Ethiopian-Israeli students have to deal with many family difficulties that affect their ability to integrate successfully, for example lack of financial support from their family or the need to help support the family. Ethiopian-Israelis also have unique difficulties in their studies, deriving, inter alia, from culture gaps and lack of information that might help in making wise choices regarding the area of study. These difficulties require a strong support system; however, the students reported that the system provided by the institutions was insufficient. The interviewees offered several suggestions to continue developing ways to support the successful integration of Ethiopian-Israelis in higher education. These concern the academic, social and economic areas and include recommendations for support prior to and during university studies.

## Summary

This project aimed to learn, mostly from the Ethiopian-Israeli students themselves, about factors supporting and impeding successful integration into higher education. The interviews provided many insights as well as specific recommendations regarding ways to support these students. Some of the strategies are reflected in the recommendations of the steering committee to encourage and support excellence among Ethiopian-Israelis. Others may shed light on needs that have thus far have not received a satisfactory solution, and may be helpful in regularizing and improving the services currently provided to Ethiopian-Israeli students.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our appreciation to the students who participated in the study and were good enough to share their academic experiences with us. We would also like to thank the program directors for sharing with us their substantial experience in integrating Ethiopian-Israelis into institutions of higher education. The interviews with the students and the directors deepened our understanding of the needs of Ethiopian-Israelis in higher education and revealed a range of potentially helpful programmatic directions.

# Introduction

The number of Ethiopian-Israeli students in higher education in Israel increased considerably between 2000 and 2016 (from 747 to 2,966). However, their representation remains low relative to their percentage in the general population: they make up 1.2% of the student body, compared to 3.3% of the Jewish population aged 20-29. The low proportion reflects the barriers that many of them face in attempting to integrate into academe. The main barriers are a low percentage of eligibility for matriculation meeting university prerequisites (34% vs. 60% of Jewish 12th-graders in 2015/16),<sup>1</sup> a low average score on the psychometric exam (448 vs. 576 among all Jewish examinees in 2015/16), and a high percentage of dropout from institutions of higher education (12% vs. 8% among all Jews in 2015/16).<sup>2</sup>

Today, many programs strive to provide a response to these barriers and to promote the integration of Ethiopian-Israelis into higher education. Some operate as pre-academic preparatory programs, allowing students to improve their matriculation average, and sometimes serve as an alternative to the psychometric test. Other initiatives are operated by the higher education institutions themselves, providing various forms of support during undergraduate studies. Similarly, the State provides a financial package that covers tuition and living costs to make it easier for Ethiopian-Israelis to integrate into academe. Today, as part of the State program to integrate Ethiopian-Israelis into society (Derekh Hadasha - New Way), an attempt is being made to regulate programs for Ethiopian-Israelis and concentrate them in the hands of the Council for Higher Education (CHE). New Way and the CHE, through the "Program to Increase Access to Higher Education for Ethiopian-Israelis," have set a goal of increasing the number of Ethiopian-

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<sup>1</sup> Special MJB processing of matriculation files and students of the Ministry of Education

<sup>2</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics. (November 28, 2016). Ethiopian-Israelis in higher education in Israel 1999/2000 - 2015/16 (Press Release). Retrieved from [http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa\\_template.html?hodaa=201606364](http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa_template.html?hodaa=201606364).

Israeli students accepted to first-degree university studies, emphasizing excellence in the sciences and creating model groups of excellent university students. In order to ensure optimal integration, they plan to cancel all programs that were designed for Ethiopian-Israelis and differentiate between them and other students, and to enhance preparatory higher education programs and provide a support package for preparatory and bachelor degree students, including tutoring, academic support, preparation for intake exams, covering the cost of dorms etc. Until recently, this kind of support was provided only through NGO-operated programs or by the higher education institutions themselves.<sup>3</sup> The CHE's planning and budgeting committee will be responsible for transferring the budget to the higher education institutions to promote the integration of Ethiopian-Israelis, thus reducing the differences in support between the institutions.

## Method

In order to achieve a better understanding of the contributing factors and barriers to the successful integration of Ethiopian-Israeli students into academic studies, we employed a qualitative research approach. This approach is commonly used when seeking to focus on the meaning that the participants give to the issue under examination.<sup>4</sup> Within this domain, we chose to use the phenomenological method, which analyzes social reality from the subjective point of view of those acting in it and experiencing it.<sup>5</sup> Bader Philanthropies commissioned Myers-JDC-Brookdale researchers to conduct a series of face-to-face interviews among Ethiopian-Israeli students.

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<sup>3</sup> The Program for Academic Excellence of Ethiopian-Israel Students, Agenda, 20.8.2017. Mined on 11.3.2018 from the CHE website [che.org.il/](http://che.org.il/)

<sup>4</sup> Denzin N. K., & Lincoln Y. S. (2005). Introduction: Discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed, pp. 1-33). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

<sup>5</sup> Schwandt, T. A. (1998). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (pp. 221-259). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Through these interviews, the researchers attempted to examine how the students perceived successful integration into academic studies, and what factors helped or impeded them in achieving this success. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with six male and four female Ethiopian-Israelis, ages 24 to 32, who had studied for at least one year in a higher education institution. In addition, three interviews were conducted with directors of programs to promote the integration of Ethiopian-Israelis into academe. As the interviews proceeded, we felt that we had reached saturation and that the same themes were being repeated by the interviewees. We found that this number of interviews and the variety in interviewee characteristics and academic institutions (see Appendix for details) allowed us to gather the required amount of information in order to understand the research topic, based on a variety of experiences and perceptions.

The students were approached in a variety of ways: through the Administration for Immigrant Students,<sup>6</sup> the deans' offices in the various institutions, directors of programs for the promotion of Ethiopian-Israelis, WhatsApp groups of Ethiopian-Israeli students, personal acquaintance and "bring a friend." We looked for students who had completed one year of academic studies, regardless of whether they had been successful or had struggled. However, all those who were interviewed for the study were successful students. It appears that a sense of social responsibility led those who were more active socially, and those wishing to make a change, to participate in the study and to share their experience with the researchers. Although these students are generally successful in their studies, much can be learned from them about factors leading to success and about what needs to be done in order to increase the number of Ethiopian-Israelis in higher education.

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<sup>6</sup> The Student Administration is an array of administrative units aimed at providing students with the administrative support required during their university studies. The Administration for Immigrant Students is responsible for supporting immigrant students and providing financial assistance.




This document presents the main insights that arose from analysis of the interviews. First, we present a short description of the perceptions of students and directors regarding successful integration into higher education, and then we present the factors that have helped, and are helping, the students to integrate, as well as factors that have and are impeding their progress. Finally, we suggest ways of assisting Ethiopian-Israelis to integrate into higher education.

## Perception of Successful Integration into Higher Education

The interviews with the students highlighted the differences between the way they perceived success in high-school prior to their entrance into academic studies and the way they perceive it today. At first, the achievement approach was dominant: successful integration was linked to academic success - i.e. good grades and completing the degree with a high average score. Their perception was that success depends on the students themselves - if they apply themselves, are diligent and give it their all, they will be successful. However, university life brought about the understanding that success is multi-faceted, and that its achievement depends not only on the student's academic work, but also on his/her interaction with the environment. Thus, the emphasis shifted from academic success to a combination of additional factors that could contribute to a successful integration: social, economic, feeling of belonging, social engagement - to be able to make a difference, suitability for a chosen profession and satisfaction with the choice, the contribution of the studies to daily life and to finding employment, and the balance between higher education and other areas of life.


One of the students' most notable insights was that the social aspect is vital to successful integration into higher education. Fellow students can offer emotional support during a crisis and instrumental support through joint studies, providing advice, and sharing information, etc.

As one of the students said:



*Friends are very important. Even if you're not that good in academic studies, friends are those who will keep you grounded and make sure that you don't break. They lift you up. Even more than the economic and academic aspects, this is the most important aspect. Many students would drop out without it."*

Another student said:



*...My sister asked me: 'what tip can you give me for the beginning of the academic year?' And I said: 'try to fit in socially. Be friendly and everything else will fall into place, including the studies.'"*

Successful integration was also linked to a sense of belonging. Success was perceived as the ability to become part of general society, to feel that you belong and to be treated the same as the other students, but at the same time to take responsibility and to represent the Ethiopian community. For some of the interviewees, the topic of skin color was very meaningful, and appeared to be a sensitive issue that had become part of their life. For others, ethnicity and skin color became significant following their entrance into academic studies, because of their new awareness of the small number of Ethiopian-Israelis in higher education institutions. This small number made the interviewees realize that their higher education cannot be taken for granted. They noted that, to them, success is the fact that they had access to higher education as well as the privilege and ability to choose academic studies.

Interviews with the program directors revealed a similar perception of successful integration into higher education. They, too, saw the social aspect and a sense of belonging as very important, in addition to the academic aspect. Unlike the students, the directors emphasized the social aspect as a



way to create a network that would later help the students when entering the job market. Further, whereas the students felt that once the social goal was achieved, everything became easier, the directors emphasized a sense of belonging. They claimed that enhancing a sense of belonging would open the door for many more Ethiopian-Israelis to integrate into higher education.

## Factors Supporting Successful Integration

Successful integration into higher education depends on many factors: for example, what the students themselves bring to the table, the support they receive during their studies, internal motivation etc. The students who were interviewed believe that they succeeded in integrating, both academically and socially. Most are good students - hardworking, diligent, and determined to succeed, with good grades. The directors revealed that these students face considerable difficulties but that they are determined and highly motivated to succeed. Analysis of the interviews identified three key factors to successful integration.

- 1. Family members, and particularly parents, play a pivotal role in choosing higher education and succeeding in it. They serve as a role model, a motivator, and a source of support**

Most of the students who were interviewed had been exposed to higher education at home, either through older siblings who paved the way or through other family members (e.g. cousins) who had attended higher education. Thus, many said that one of the main reasons for their choice of higher education was their home and family. Parents who had not attended university themselves, were nevertheless role models in their ambition to develop their personal abilities, through participating in courses and self-

enrichment programs. The students also reported that their parents viewed education as a source of social and economic mobility, and so had pushed them to advance and develop. The effect of the attitudes prevalent at home was noted by the program directors as well. They reported that students who had been exposed at home to positive attitudes toward education always found it easier to persevere and succeed. The parents' role in their children's successful integration was also reflected in things they did to provide their children with a better starting point - the choice of schools they attended, high involvement in school activities, signing them up for afternoon courses, etc. In addition, the students noted their parents' support of their studies, particularly in the emotional aspect - such as encouragement and reinforcement. A few of the students also noted that their parents offered financial support. One of the students described this aspect:

*Our Ethiopian neighbors kept saying to my parents... nothing will become of your children, they're sitting and studying all day long and not going out to work... But my parents understood that what would really help is that their children should study... Part of the reason that most of the Ethiopian population does not study is... simply because they don't have that support, when they tell you: you must study, you have to study, even the simple act of coming to a parent-teacher meeting. My friends told me that their parents didn't go... So it really all starts from home."*

Another student also spoke of the importance of support and added the issue of meeting parental expectations. His words, and those of other students, reveal that being pushed by the parents paved the road to higher education, but the concern of letting them down was what helped them to persevere:

*... I could drop out like everyone else, but this is also an issue of a family that offers support, not financial support but emotional support... And this support is of 'all will be fine, keep going.' This helps. And also, my parents did not come to Israel to change their*

*lives; they came to change mine. They've already missed the boat, but they're doing everything so that we succeed... I remember my father saying many times, we've done our bit... we brought you here so that you can get your chance."*

## 2. Formal support from organizations promoting the Ethiopian-Israeli population and informal support from friends increase the students' ability to persevere with their studies, and contribute to successful integration into higher education

Formal and informal support is a cornerstone of success in facing and overcoming difficulties. The students noted the support they received both from their friends and from the system, as factors that helped them succeed in their studies.

**Support from friends.** As noted above, the students placed much emphasis on the social aspect of integration. Accordingly, they mentioned their friends as one of the main factors contributing to their academic success. Thanks to the support and encouragement offered by friends at times of crisis, and the assistance they offered each other with regard to information, advice and joint studies, they managed to overcome difficulties and persevere with their studies. Those who struggled initially reported feelings of loneliness and great difficulty in their studies, without a support group. The fact that they were a minority was mentioned in this context as well; the tendency to look for your own peer group, and the small number of Ethiopian-Israeli students, made it difficult for some of the interviewees to integrate socially.

**Support from the academic institution.** At those moments of loneliness, some interviewees found solace in formal providers, such as an advisor in an academic institution or an official in charge of immigrant students. If an institution has a good solution in place, that provider becomes a significant and vital person in the students' lives, both as a source of information and as a source of support. In cases where the provider is unsympathetic, the

students' sense of helplessness is immense. Further, the students and the directors noted the great financial support that they receive, which makes it possible for them to study. The Immigrant Students Administration and the Ministry of Defense provide scholarships that cover tuition, as well as monthly subsistence grants, and the programs for the advancement of Ethiopian-Israelis provide grants to subsidize dorm living. Other forms of support were also noted, such as remedial classes, mentors, teachers' and lecturers' reception hours, pre-academic preparatory programs, and advancement programs that provide a package of academic, social and economic support.

**3. Internal motivation factors and personal characteristics of the students have helped, and are helping, them meet the prerequisites of higher education and persevere in their studies.**

Despite the great importance that the students attributed to the support received from others, they did attribute some of their academic success to their own personal qualities. They noted their ability to be diligent, their regular attendance in class, their understanding of the study materials, their investment, their strong will to succeed, and their determination to achieve their goals. They spoke of their ability to use various tools in order to get ahead: meetings with people who have succeeded in their field, meetings with lecturers, watching YouTube videos in order to enhance their knowledge, recording lectures in order to revise material, etc. Many noted their interest in the subject of their studies and their love of knowledge, and reported that they had already excelled in high-school. In this connection, they noted the understanding of the importance of education for personal advancement as well as for creating social change. Other characteristics noted with regard to success were optimism - which allows one to see things in a positive light and not despair - and lack of fear of challenges and failure.

One of the students put it in these words:

*I got as far as I got because I made the effort. When I arrived in this country, I did not even know how to say Shalom. My friends learned Judaism and Hebrew in Ethiopia but I knew nothing, and today they are not in higher education and I am."*

The students also noted the preparations they had made prior to their entrance into higher education, which can also indicate their strong motivation to succeed. This preparation took the form of making educated choices with regard to selecting the higher education institution and area of studies - by consulting with other students, attending open days, and working in the chosen area to see if the fit is good. They also spent time reading up on the materials they expected to learn during their studies.

## Barriers to Successful Integration

Despite the great progress that Ethiopian-Israelis have made over the years, the gap between them and the overall Jewish population in Israel is still large, and they contend with many personal and family-related difficulties that affect their ability to integrate into higher education. One of the directors described their situation as running on a very thin surface, with no safety net. Any change in their situation may overturn their plans. In analyzing the interviews with the students and program directors, we identified four main barriers to successful integration.

**1 ■ Ethiopian-Israelis' starting point and the psychometric exam requirement are a significant barrier to entry into higher education institutions**

One of the barriers noted by both students and program directors was the psychometric exam, which is a condition of admission to university. Young

Ethiopian-Israelis have trouble with this exam and their average score is much lower than the average of all Jewish candidates. Not only do they fail to achieve a high score; many of them avoid the exam altogether, for fear of failure. Instead, they choose to attend colleges that do not require the exam, or give up on the area of studies that they had wanted, for the sake of a general degree or an area with lower demands because there are fewer candidates. Thus, they undermine their chances of finding appropriate employment after they complete their studies. The directors also pointed to the low percentage of matriculation eligibility, particularly for university-level matriculation, as a barrier. They also noted in this context that high-schools do not guide the students in the direction of tracks that can help them in their future life.


**2. Despite receiving broad financial support, the students face economic difficulties that may affect their decisions as well as their ability to concentrate on their studies**

Both students and directors identified economic difficulty as a barrier. Nearly all the students interviewed reported this difficulty, although most said that they do manage, thanks to the available support, their savings, and jobs that they take during their studies or during vacation periods. The interviews reveal a picture of very poor families - unemployed parents subsisting on social benefits, or parents working as cleaners and making a meager living. Not only are there very few families that can offer any financial support, but some of the students are required to help support the family. Some delay their studies because of this and start at a relatively late age, having fulfilled their duty to their families and saved enough money. The students spoke of the difficulty of combining work and studies - particularly during the first year, which is particularly intensive; of the difficulty of finding student jobs; and of the difficulty of calculating every expense. In this context, we observed a need for guidance regarding financial management. The students

spoke of the need to receive early information regarding expected expenses during their studies, such as what they absolutely have to buy and what they can do without.


In some cases, the financial consideration was crucial in choosing a school close to home, which would save on living expenses in dorms or in an apartment. In other cases, students chose to live away from home and to bear the financial burden, since their home did not offer the quiet and space required for study. The interviews revealed the "catch 22" situation of these students: on the one hand, these are large families, living in small homes, with no room to study; on the other hand, the economic constrictions prevent living away from home. The directors said that for this reason, the programs pay for dorms and sometimes even obligate students to live in dorms. The interviews also revealed that there are apparently significant differences among the institutions in the extent of financial aid given to students.

This is how one of the students described the difficulty of the absence of a family capable of financial support:



*From the economic perspective, this can be a very big crisis. You get some sort of support, a scholarship, but that's about it. You don't have the support of a family that can give you financial help when you need it. Few Ethiopian families, that I know anyway, can help their children financially."*

Another student explained how the economic situation undermined his studies:



*...Although I got 100% support from my family... but the thing is when you come from a family with many children – when you don't have a room where you can come and sit and study quietly, that's a huge setback...People can't understand how at the age of 25 you don't have that privacy to sit down and quietly open a notebook... whole days, weeks even, that I live my life outside of the house. "*



### **3 ■ The students face academic difficulties similar to those of other students but also difficulties that are unique to them**

In the interviews, the students reported mainly academic difficulties that characterize many students, such as the difficulty of meeting the many high demands. In addition, they and the directors also spoke of unique difficulties, such as not having a place to study, as reported above, or dealing with unfamiliar academic language and critical thinking. Academic life is Western in its language and thinking, and thus may invoke feelings of alienation. Since most of the students were born in Israel and had traversed a similar path to their Israeli counterparts - education and army frameworks - this situation may invoke feelings of frustration and helplessness. The directors also reported difficulties with English - reading comprehension and writing - as well as difficulties arising from the gap between how they had been perceived so far - as very good, even excellent high school students - and the difficulties they experienced in higher education.

Another difficulty noted by both students and directors is the lack of information to enable an educated choice of field of study. They claimed that Ethiopian-Israelis choose fields that are familiar to them, without examining how well they are suited to that field. The choice of an unsuitable field derives, inter alia, from a lack of familiarity with the existing diversity and not having someone who can help match the field of study to the student's abilities and interests. A bad fit can impede retention and may lead to dropping out of higher education. The directors also noted a lack of information regarding advanced degrees and what is required in order to make progress in academic life. They emphasized that this type of information was crucial for students who are first generation in higher education,<sup>7</sup> so that they can navigate their course wisely and fulfil their potential for advanced degrees as well.

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<sup>7</sup> Students who are the first in their family to attend an academic institution, who have no parents or siblings who had studied in a higher education institution.

## **4. The support system in higher education institutions is limited and sometimes inefficient.**

One of the main support systems for students is that of mentors (advanced students), who provide support for struggling students. The interviews revealed many complaints concerning the mentors - with regard to both a shortage of mentors and their lack of professionalism. The students said that there were not enough mentors and, because of the "first come first serve" system, students whose difficulties surfaced only at a later stage in the academic year might find themselves without help. One student said that she had had to pay for tutoring because she had not received any help. The students also reported that the tutors were not readily available, as they were busy with their own issues. It also appears that the tutors were chosen because they excelled as students but, in fact, they often do not remember the material and are sometimes lacking in teaching skills. Another complaint was that the assistance provided by the Administration for Immigrant Students and the Dean's Office is not easily accessible and not everyone is aware of it. Some of the students found out only at a later stage that they have the option of receiving help or that they are entitled to an array of benefits. Students who had studied in a pre-academic preparatory program and participated in one of the programs for the advancement of Ethiopian-Israelis reported having difficulty when the support ceased after the first year of studies. Some of the students felt the need to continue receiving the intensive package of support throughout their entire studies towards a degree, since the difficulties do not diminish.

# Recommendations for continued development of ways to promote successful integration into higher education

The difficulties and unmet needs reported by the students, as well as the experiences of the program directors, resulted in a number of recommendations for the continued development of ways to promote the successful integration of Ethiopian-Israelis in higher education. These recommendations address the academic, social, and economic areas, and include recommendations for assistance before and during academic studies.

It is worth noting that many of the recommendations proposed by the interviewees may be relevant to other at-risk populations as well, such as immigrant students in general, students from minority groups, or students from a background of out-of-home placement with no family backing.

## 1. Enhance and expand the preparatory courses and programs to promote Ethiopian-Israelis

The pre-academic preparatory programs are aimed at making a change in a relatively short time, by providing a broad package to address a variety of needs. They have many advantages: they assist students in improving their matriculation grades and enhancing their chances of acceptance in higher education and, at times, even serve as an alternative to the psychometric exam. They strengthen the students' knowledge in areas that will help them later integrate into bachelor studies; they improve their learning skills; they help them familiarize themselves with the academic framework while offering a supportive environment; and they offer a great deal of support

through tutoring, personal attention and economic assistance. The programs for the promotion of Ethiopian-Israelis operating within the pre-academic preparatory programs provide an additional level of support to that offered by the colleges or universities, and thus improve the students' chances of meeting prerequisites and arriving at higher education institutions better prepared for academic studies. The main advantage of these programs is the personal support offered to the students. This personal attention allows for identifying each student's unique needs and providing a focused response. It is worth noting that the work in these programs is demanding and that there is a lot of supervision of the students with regard to study hours and assignments, etc. Despite the unpleasantness of supervising independent and mature people, the directors reported that this has positive effects.

Another advantage of the programs is their ability to improve the integration of Ethiopian-Israelis in study areas that provide them with a better starting point for employment. This is achieved in two ways - provision of information and liaison services.

The first way is provision of information. As noted, one of the difficulties raised during the interviews, by both students and directors, was that Ethiopian-Israelis lack basic information that would assist them in wisely choosing an area of studies and a school. Some programs emphasize this aspect and provide comprehensive information about the various areas of study and the differences between them, and about the available institutions and their conditions of acceptance, requirements, etc. This service should be enhanced and expanded.

The second way is offering liaison services between students and the academic facility. Since the staff in the pre-academic preparatory programs know the students well, the academic institution can consult with them about students who missed meeting the threshold conditions by only a few points, and allow them to be accepted, based on the opinions of the pre-academic preparatory program staff. This could be an additional measure

for acceptance, which could help increase the number of Ethiopian-Israeli participants in higher education. To this end, there is a need to enhance cooperation between the academic institutions and the pre-academic preparatory programs.

## **2 ■ Create orientation sessions to provide students with vital information on relevant subjects, in order to reduce feelings of loneliness and confusion at the beginning of studies**

The students reported a great need for information on how to steer their way in an academic institution, e.g. how to register or whom to approach for help on various issues. The interviews with students and directors revealed a need to facilitate the students' access to university life, since often this is their first encounter with an institution of higher education. It is proposed that a facilitator be appointed who would welcome the students and explain to them what needs to be done, whom to approach and on which issue, and who would also impart learning skills and information about students' rights and obligations, in order to enhance their sense of belonging and ease the initial stages of their studies.

It is also proposed that information continue to be provided throughout the students' studies, in order to help them make decisions at particular turning points. One of the needs raised by both students and directors was the need for information on what can be done with a degree after they finish their studies. Bridging the gap between the academic world and the world of work is essential, and therefore should be discussed while they are still in college or university. The students suggested, for example, that lectures be offered by professionals and people who succeeded in different ways, in various areas relevant to the future of the students. They felt that these lecturers, some of whom would, hopefully, be Ethiopian-Israelis, could serve as a proxy for the role model that was missing from home, and provide vital information on ways to make use of an academic degree in future

employment. As one of the students said:

*During the time that they are studying towards a degree, people forget why they are there... You're there in order to achieve higher education and make use of it later... It's so important to remind people what they are there for."*

### **3 ■ Enhancing the support system provided to students during their bachelor degree studies**

The academic difficulties that the students face as they study towards their bachelor degree raise the need to enhance the support system currently on offer. As noted above, the current support system does not function well and ways to improve it should be considered. Further, despite the broad economic support provided to the students, the subsistence scholarship currently on offer stands at NIS.600, which is insufficient, particularly for students who need to pay for living quarters. We recommend findings ways of expanding this support - for example, providing progressive, differential scholarships, such as a higher subsistence benefit during the first year of study and an examination of each student's personal needs.

One of the decisions of the CHE's Committee for the Integration of Ethiopian Israelis was to define a single annual sum for the students' various needs such as tutoring, dorms, mental support, diagnoses, etc. Each student could then decide how to invest these funds. One issue that the directors raised was that the students themselves often struggle to identify their most pressing needs, or those needs where an investment in the present would be particularly profitable in the future. To this end, there is a need for support from a professional who can recognize their needs and identify the places where an investment would yield the best return in the long run. It may also be worth considering workshops for wise economic conduct, which could assist the students in better using the funds provided to them.

## **4. Enhancing a sense of belonging through social activities, and registering Ethiopian-Israeli holidays and special events on the academic calendar**

Students and directors raised the need of enhancing the social perspective and improving Ethiopian-Israelis' sense of belonging, as a basis for expanding their integration into higher education. A socially cohesive group has more power to bring about change, and the individuals who are part of the group develop a self-assurance that helps them in all other aspects. The programs for Ethiopian-Israelis that are operated in the pre-academic preparatory programs usually organize social activities and celebrate special Ethiopian holidays and events, such as the Sigd or the memorial day for Ethiopian Jews who died on their way to Israel. However, these activities take place only in some of the institutions and are rare. This custom should be expanded. The students noted the need to organize social activities not only in the pre-academic preparatory programs but also throughout university studies. Some reported personal initiatives of organizing groups to discuss various issues - some to do with Ethiopian-Israelis and some not - and of celebrating special occasions.

## **5. Finding solutions for bureaucratic barriers such as age limits or length of studies towards a degree**

The interviews revealed bureaucratic difficulties such as age restrictions for receiving scholarships and subsistence benefits, which make it difficult to make use of these benefits at an older age. With few exceptions, the CHE pays for Ethiopian-Israeli students up to age 28, and the Ministry of Defense provides assistance up to five years after release from the army. The interviewees claimed that, among Ethiopian-Israeli, the age at which they enter into higher education is higher, particularly among young men who are initially busy with building up savings and helping the family. The age limit is a hindrance to the opportunity of integrating into higher education, and the possibility of removing this barrier should be considered.



Another consideration is the possibility of expanding the length of studies. Setting a definite time for completing a degree bars those who fail to comply with it from continuing to receive government support for tuition. Because of their difficulties, Ethiopian-Israelis often fail to comply with the time limit, and this should be taken into consideration.

## Summary

This paper sought to present the perspective of Ethiopian-Israeli students with regard to their successful integration into higher education. The students who volunteered to participate in the study had excelled in high-school and are currently succeeding in higher education. Similarly, the programs whose directors were interviewed also serve mainly students with high motivation and abilities. If these good students, who had the support and encouragement of their families, painted a picture of multiple difficulties and a range of unmet needs, obviously the needs of students with poorer beginnings and with complex difficulties would be greater.

The recommendations of the CHE's and Derech Hadasha's steering committee to encourage and support excellence among Ethiopian-Israelis have already addressed some of the needs presented in this document, such as strengthening the higher education support programs, expanding the support mantle for preparatory and first-degree students, and increasing the number of students moving on to advanced degrees. However, there are additional issues that need addressing, such as personal support and provision of focused responses. Expanding economic support is important, but it seems that the students also need the advice of professionals who know them well, with regard to how to use that support. Further, one of the decisions of the steering committee is to discontinue the separate programs - i.e. the programs provided only to Ethiopian-Israelis - and to incorporate them into the general support programs. Regarding this issue, the directors were of two minds. On the one hand, there is a consensus that it is better to

integrate Ethiopian-Israelis into society and provide responses to individual needs, rather than target the overall needs of all Ethiopian-Israelis. On the other hand, the gaps are still very large and therefore, under current conditions, segregated programs succeed in getting the best results. This dilemma raises the question of what is the proper balance between providing assistance through general programs and making it more accessible to Ethiopian-Israeli students, in order to overcome the barriers preventing them from using these services, and providing targeted assistance, which takes into consideration the unique needs of Ethiopian-Israelis.

# Appendix: Personal Characteristics of the Interviewees

	Gender	Age	Ethiopian-born	Place of residence	Completed high-school with full matriculation	First generation of higher education	Institution of higher education	Area of Studies	Year of study
1	Male	25	-	Ashkelon	✓	Siblings	Ashkelon Academic College	Economics and Administration	3rd
2	Male	29	✓	Jerusalem	✓	First generation	Azrieli College of Engineering Jerusalem	Industrial Engineering and Management	4th
3	Female	24	-	Kiryat Ekron	✓	Siblings	Azrieli College of Engineering Jerusalem	Materials Science	2nd
4	Male	28	✓	Jerusalem	-	Relatives	Azrieli College of Engineering Jerusalem	Industrial Engineering and Management	4th
5	Female	25	-	Ashdod	✓	Relatives	Bar Ilan University	Biology	3rd
6	Male	24	-	Jerusalem	✓	Sister	Hadassah Academic College	Computer sciences	2nd
7	Male	29	-	Netivot	✓	Siblings	Tel Aviv University	Educational Systems Administration	Masters
8	Male	32	-	Hadera	✓	Siblings	The Hebrew University of Jerusalem	Nursing	1st
9	Female	25	-	Kfar Saba	✓	Relatives	Ben Gurion University	Social Work	3rd
10	Female	27	-	Yavne	✓	First generation	Bar Ilan University	Human Resources and Political Science	2nd