

Integrating Bedouin into Higher Education

An Evaluation of the Gateway to Academia Pilot at Sapir College

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Abstract

Background

This report summarizes the findings of an evaluation study of the **Gateway to Academia** pilot at Sapir College – an experimental implementation of a program to integrate young Bedouin into higher education in Israel.

The number of Bedouin students studying towards a bachelor's degree in Israel rose in 2010-16 from 942 to 2,034.¹ Nonetheless, despite the extensive support provided to all Arab students preceding their entry into higher education, the Bedouin population in southern Israel remains under-represented. In recent years, the many difficulties faced by Bedouin in academia have led to intensive examination and planning both at Sapir College and on the national level. As part of this process, Sapir College initiated the Gateway to Academia program, based on its past experience and sense of commitment to the Bedouin population in the south. The Council for Higher Education and its Planning and Budgeting Committee approved and funded the program's experimental operation and accompanying evaluation study. The first cohort of the pilot began studying in 2015-16. The Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute conducted the study in 2017-18.

Study Goal

The goal of the study was to help the Planning and Budgeting Committee decide if the pilot should be continued and adopted as a program over time at additional institutions of higher learning. To this end, the study focused on examining the implementation process from the perspective of the participating students and of the pilot and college office-holders. It also examined the contribution to students based on their perceptions and scholastic achievements.

Method

The study employed a mixed methodology – quantitative and qualitative. The source for the latter was interviews and focus groups with students and with key figures from the pilot, the college, and other academic institutions in the south. The quantitative data consisted of information from three student surveys and from the administrative

¹ Excluding the Open University. Other young Bedouin study under the Palestinian Authority or overseas. However, their exact numbers are unknown.

data of Sapir College on the Bedouin students in the pilot, in comparison with both Bedouin students admitted directly (not via the pilot – hereafter: direct-admissions Bedouin students) and with Jewish students at the college.

Findings

- The Bedouin students in the pilot scored lower on most of the admissions characteristics than both the direct-admissions Bedouin students and the Jewish students at the college.
- The rate of Gateway to Academia students continuing towards a degree at the end of their first undergraduate year (i.e., after two years in the pilot: one in the Gateway to Academia year and another as first-year undergraduates) was lower than that of direct-admissions Bedouin students and of Jewish students.
- The pilot does appear to help the participants: their scholastic status at the end of their first undergraduate year was higher than that of the direct-admissions Bedouin students. At the same time, it was lower than that of the Jewish students.
- The students persevering in their studies (they did not drop out) were the stronger participants among those who started in the pilot.
- Throughout the years of the pilot, the number of students did not meet the target set by the college.

Conclusion

The study sought to understand how to improve the integration of young Bedouin into academia. Thus, the main question was: **Which types of assistance and modes of work of the Gateway to Academia program are the most significant to promote the successful integration of young Bedouin into higher education?** We found that there is no single type of assistance or mode of work that is significant; rather, the entire package offered by the program, in terms of both the diverse types and scope of assistance, comprises the elements that promote successful integration.

The number of students participating in the pilot was lower than expected and their achievements were relatively moderate. This indicates a need for a continuing process of learning and development to succeed in the task of integrating young Bedouin into academia. The study yielded insights into the desirable way to implement the program:

1. To improve the integration of young Bedouin into academia, most of the candidates require a preparatory year counting towards academic credits.

2. There is an advantage to the small, separate classes offered by the Gateway to Academia year as preparation for integrating into the first year of bachelor's studies together with the rest of the students at the college.
3. It is important to provide the students with personal support and guidance throughout their undergraduate studies.
4. It is preferable to have a single campus for Gateway to Academia and undergraduate studies.
5. It is important that the students' scholastic status be monitored continuously, and that assistance be tailored to individual needs.
6. The improvement of Hebrew and English language skills should be ongoing.
7. It is important to provide all Bedouin students with financial aid.
8. Bedouin students should be encouraged to pursue more diverse areas of study.
9. It would be advantageous to have admissions exams that are common to several academic institutions and uniform over the years.
10. To integrate young Bedouin into higher education, academic institutions in southern Israel must be committed to the task.
11. It is recommended that the college employ people from the Bedouin population in the south to serve as role models and enhance the sense of belonging of Bedouin students.
12. It is important to ensure that assistance is granted to all students in the general Arab population within the framework of the National Plan for Expanding Access of Arab, Druze and Circassian Students to Higher Education in Israel, regardless of the Gateway to Academia Program.
13. Public transportation to academic institutions should be improved.

Executive Summary

Background

This report summarizes the findings of an evaluation study of the Gateway to Academia pilot at Sapir College – an experimental implementation of a program to integrate Bedouin students into higher education. The pilot, like the study, is part of a broader program and study – the National Plan for Expanding Access of Arab, Druze and Circassian Students to Higher Education in Israel, sponsored by Israel’s Council for Higher Education (CHE) and its Planning and Budgeting Committee.

The number of Bedouin students studying towards a bachelor’s degree rose in 2010-16 from 942 to 2,034.² Nonetheless, despite the extensive support provided to all Arab students preceding their entry into higher education, the Bedouin population in southern Israel remains under-represented. In recent years, the many difficulties faced by Bedouin in academia have led to intensive examination and planning both at Sapir College and on the national level. As part of this process, Sapir College initiated the Gateway to Academia program, based on its past experience and sense of commitment to the Bedouin population in the south.

Gateway to Academia is a four-year program towards a bachelor’s degree. Its goal is to examine the best way to integrate young Bedouin in Israel’s south into higher education. Candidates also participate in the summer program of One Step Ahead to become acquainted with academia, strengthen their learning and language skills, and undergo screening tests for the program. The first of the four years is known as the Gateway to Academia year. Its goal is to prepare Bedouin students for academic studies by improving their learning and language skills, and allowing them to experience academic courses. Apart from the screening tests in One Step Ahead, the Gateway to Academia year constitutes additional screening as it examines whether the Bedouin students are suitable for the college. This year offers supportive courses to improve learning, language, computer and soft skills, as well as academic courses identical in content and level to regular college courses and accompanied by extensive scholastic assistance. During the Gateway to Academia year, students study in small classes separate from the main college. During their first undergraduate year (i.e., the second year of the program), they are integrated into regular classes as regular students while continuing to receive enhanced scholastic assistance. Throughout the program, they receive extensive financial aid as well as personal support from program staff – a

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student coordinator, a social worker, and a program coordinator. They also participate in the program's social activities.

The CHE Planning and Budgeting Committee approved and funded the pilot and its accompanying evaluation study. The goal of the pilot was to examine the tools used to successfully integrate young Bedouin into bachelor studies. The first cohort began studying in 2015-16. The Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute conducted the study in 2017-18.

Bedouin candidates may also apply to the college directly like any other student. In the past three years, 498 Bedouin embarked on bachelor studies at Sapir College, 66% via the pilot, and 34% via direct admissions (hereafter: direct-admissions Bedouin students).

The Study

Study Goal

The goal of the study was to help the CHE Planning and Budgeting Committee decide if the pilot should be continued and adopted as a program over time at additional institutions of higher learning. To this end, the study focused on examining the implementation process from the perspective of the participating students and of the pilot and college office-holders. It also examined the contribution to students based on their perceptions and scholastic achievements.

Study Design

The study employed a mixed methodology – quantitative and qualitative. This methodology made it possible to hear the voices of everyone involved in the pilot and to understand the relevant processes in depth. This, in turn, can serve as a basis for constructing a further study to obtain representative, objective and subjective data on the participants, their perceptions and attitudes. The qualitative data were received from interviews and focus groups with students and with key figures from the pilot, the college, and other academic institutions in the south. Important in themselves, these data also formed the basis for the questions of the student surveys. The data were analyzed using Narralyzer to identify common themes and test for reliability. The quantitative data consisted of the college's administrative data on the Bedouin students in the pilot vis-à-vis the data on direct-admissions Bedouin students (not in the pilot) and on Jewish students at the college. It also included information from the three student surveys – the graduates of the first Gateway to Academia Year, the graduates of the first undergraduate year in the pilot, and the participants of the One Step Ahead summer program.

Main Findings

These were the main findings of the study:

- **Population characteristics:** Most of the students in the pilot were 21 or younger, women, and stemming from a low-income background. A third were first-generation college-educated (the first of their nuclear families to attend college); only a fifth had at least one college-educated parent.
- **Characteristics of admissions:** On most of the characteristics (for example, psychometric score and level of English), the pilot Bedouin scored lower than both the direct-admissions Bedouin and the Jewish students.
- **Student considerations regarding participation in Gateway to Academia:** The main considerations were the financial aid provided by the pilot, the personal attention, guidance and support from the pilot staff, and the extensive, varied scholastic support.
- **College commitment to the integration of Bedouin students:** The college administration showed explicit commitment to the task; it developed the Takdam program (to integrate students into the department of multi-disciplinary studies, which operated at the college in 2011-12–2014-15), as well as Gateway to Academia, for which it appointed a specific steering committee comprising senior college personnel.
- **Areas of study:** Whereas the Jewish students were spread over all 16 college departments, at a rate of 2% to 10% of the total Jewish student body per department, both the pilot and the direct-admissions Bedouin were highly concentrated in the department of multi-disciplinary studies (35% and 40% respectively).
- **Perseverance in studies:** In this context, we defined scholastic perseverance as studies continuing through the end of the first undergraduate year. Three groups were compared: the Bedouin students in the pilot, the direct-admissions Bedouin students, and the Jewish students. As regards the Bedouin in the pilot, a comparison was made between two points in time: all the students who began the pilot (the Gateway to Academia year, N=112) and all the students who began the first undergraduate year (omitting the students who stopped studying during the Gateway to Academia year: N=77). A relatively low rate (58%) of students who started the pilot continued studying through the first undergraduate year. However, among those who began the first undergraduate year, perseverance was considerably high – 84% at the end of that year. For purposes of comparison, the rate of perseverance of direct-admissions Bedouin students and of Jewish students at the end of the first undergraduate year was some 70%. Most of the dropout from the pilot took place in the Gateway to Academia year and was due to failure to meet the study requirements or the requirements to pass into the first undergraduate year, or personal, family and financial reasons.

Gateway to Academia Year

- **Scholastic status at the end of the Gateway to Academia year:** It appears that at the end of the Gateway to Academia year, the scholastic status of the second cohort was higher than that of a substantial portion of the first. The average score on the supportive courses for both cohorts was similar – 80%; on the academic courses, the average score of the second cohort was 13 points higher than that of the first (73 vs. 60 respectively); also, the rate of “failure” in academic courses in the Gateway to Academia year was higher among the first cohort than the second (29% vs. 13% respectively). Minor differences were found between the admissions characteristics of the two cohorts. However, 45% of the first cohort had previously attended a pre-academic preparatory course whereas no students of the second cohort had done so. It may be that the first cohort had begun at a lower starting point (possible corroboration for this is that they had been required to attend a preparatory course prior to admission, which was to have improved their starting point). The differences between the two cohorts may also derive from improvement of the initial screening for the pilot, from a somewhat more diverse student spread among the departments, and from changes effected in the curriculum, i.e., in the academic courses pursued by each cohort in the Gateway to Academia year.
- **Types of assistance:** The overriding majority of the students (75%-100%) took advantage of the gamut of assistance offered by the pilot. According to the reports of pilot students and staff, there were advantages to studying in small, separate classes. There were also reports of difficulty in meeting all the requirements as the curriculum was deemed very heavy, including double the amount of study hours per academic course and the wide range of supportive courses. According to the students, some of the supportive courses could be shortened (e.g., familiarization with computers). On the whole, most of the students assessed most of the types of assistance as helpful to a great extent.
- **Improved learning and language skills:** In the estimation of the students, the pilot had mainly improved their academic writing abilities and their command of Hebrew. They attributed the smallest contribution to improvement in their command of English.
- **Personal assessment of the study experience:** The students reported that their personal experience at the college was positive. For example, most agreed that the rules and regulations of the college were fair, that they felt part of the college, and that they had whom to turn to should they encounter scholastic, personal or administrative problems.

The First Undergraduate Year

- **Scholastic status at the end of the first undergraduate year:** The scholastic status of students completing two years in the pilot (omitting the students who stopped studying during the Gateway to Academia year) was higher than that of the direct-admissions Bedouin students but lower than that of Jewish students in terms of credits and grade averages.
- **Types of assistance:** First-year undergraduates participated in scholastic assistance in 11 semester courses; 73% chose to receive academic mentoring; 49% – an extensive English course. All the students received financial aid and personal support from the pilot staff, and they took part in social activities. Like the graduates of the Gateway to Academia year, most of the undergraduates completing their first year assessed the assistance modes as helpful to a great extent.
- **Need for additional assistance:** About two-thirds of the students persevering with their studies, who had completed two years in the pilot, reported a need for more scholastic assistance: for example, 62% – for improving their learning skills; 57% – for improving their command of English; 87% – for additional financial aid; and 50% – for additional personal advice and support.

Pilot-Student Reports on their Scholastic Functioning

As expected, students completing their first undergraduate year in the pilot reported better scholastic functioning than the graduates of the Gateway to Academia year; the former had completed two academic years at this point. Presumably, the additional (Gateway to Academia) year had improved their understanding of the study material along with their command of Hebrew. Furthermore, the dropouts from the Gateway to Academia year were presumably weaker students scholastically, suggesting that those completing the first undergraduate year were a stronger group.

For example, of those completing the first undergraduate year, 77% were able to search for learning material on their own and 60% took notes in class; of the Gateway to Academia year graduates, 51% were able to search for learning material on their own and 46% took notes in class. As for other skills, the scholastic functioning of both groups was poorer, mainly as regards English reading.

Conclusion

This report summarizes the findings of an evaluation study of the implementation of the Gateway to Academia program at Sapir College.

- The Bedouin students in the pilot scored lower on most of the admissions characteristics than both the direct-admissions Bedouin students and the Jewish students at the college.
- The rate of Gateway to Academia students continuing towards a degree at the end of their first undergraduate year (i.e., after two years in the pilot: one in the Gateway to Academia year and another as first-year undergraduates) was lower than that of direct-admissions Bedouin students and of Jewish students.
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3. It is important to provide the students with personal support and guidance throughout their undergraduate studies.
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5. It is important that the students' scholastic status be monitored continuously, and that assistance be tailored to individual needs.
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13. Public transportation to academic institutions should be improved.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that the study accompanied the pilot in its early stages and as yet, there is no full picture of an entire cohort. The outcome measures presented in the report are interim results, relating to the first cohort. Consequently, the ability to draw conclusions from the changes made to the pilot to date is limited. It would be interesting to continue following the pilot's implementation at Sapir College: the final stage of the study is planned for the end of 2019 and will shed light on the other cohorts in the pilot and on the pilot's development. It should also provide further insights into the pilot's implementation and outcomes. Following an examination of the study findings and numerous professional discussions on the pilot, the CHE Planning and Budgeting Committee issued a call in March 2018 to other academic institutions to implement the Gateway to Academia program starting with the 2018-19 school year. A study is planned to accompany the program's expansion to the institutions that responded to the call. Among other things, it will examine the implementation and modes of work. With the expansion of the program, another topic of focus should be the recruitment of students and

the level of admissions characteristics of those joining. This topic derives from the difficulty that Sapir College faced in recruiting students, a difficulty that is expected to increase with the program's expansion. In this context, it is important to examine the activity of the Rowad program (a program advising Arab high school students on careers and higher education) and the concerted efforts undertaken with the Ministry of Education and other high schools in Bedouin localities.