

Arab Students, Three Years into Academic Studies

Assistance from the National Plan
to Expand Access to Higher Education in Israel

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This report was written as part of the evaluation of the National Plan
to Expand Access of Arab, Druze and Circassian Students to Higher Education in Israel

The study was initiated by the Council for Higher Education
and funded with its assistance

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Jerusalem | September 2019

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Abstract

Background

This is the fifth report in a series of evaluation studies on the **National Plan to Expand Access of Arab, Druze and Circassian Students to Higher Education in Israel**. The program was developed by the Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and is part of its multiyear program launched in 2012/13. The main elements of the program are scholastic and personal support of students in academic preparatory programs; One Step Ahead – preparation for those admitted to Bachelor’s studies; integration into academia (scholastic, personal and social support, mainly for first-year students); career centers; and scholarships.

Study Goals

The study had three main goals:

1. Examine the study characteristics of Arab students
2. Assess the extent of their reliance on the various types of assistance offered by the national plan
3. Evaluate the perceived contribution of program elements to the participants

Method

A telephone survey was carried out of a representative sample of 1,047 Arab students who applied for an Irteka scholarship (for Bachelor’s degree students) in the 2014/15 school year. There were 825 survey respondents. The survey was conducted in 2018, some three years after the students began their Bachelor’s studies.

Findings

- 89% of the students began their academic studies a year or more after completing high school.
- In the students’ opinion, the entirety of the assistance that they received met their needs moderately (an average of 5.2 on a scale of 0-10). Financial aid was perceived as the most helpful (cited by 52% of the respondents), followed by scholastic assistance (18%), social/cultural activity (11%), and guidance in their third year from the dean/counselor (7%).

- Not all the students felt that the assistance had been adequate. The main forms of assistance they cited in this respect were financial aid (noted by 31%), guidance (22%), and scholastic assistance (17%).
- Of those pursuing the three-year (vs. the four-year) Bachelor's program, about half (54%) completed the degree in the standard time (three years).
- A large number of Arab students in an institution of higher learning correlated positively with the percentage of students at that institution who completed a degree in the standard time, and negatively with the percentage of students at that institution who availed themselves of the varied assistance of the accessibility program.
- 6% of the respondents discontinued their studies, 60% of these (i.e. about 4% all the students) in the second year. Most of them subsequently returned to study or said that they wished to do so.

Recommended directions to develop the accessibility program

- **Preparation for academia:** For many of the students who started to study a year or more after high school, it is a good idea to regard the interval as an important maturation period providing them with an opportunity to prepare for integration into academia and to choose their institution and field of study wisely.
- **Provision of high-quality, adjusted assistance:** Given the student reports of unmet needs despite the availability of varied forms of assistance, it is important to emphasize ongoing monitoring of each student's situation, to help them take advantage of the existing assistance, to examine the extent of assistance, and to offer professional assistance adjusted to their needs.
- **Increase in the number of graduates completing their degree in the standard time:** The accessibility program focuses on integration into academia. To increase the rate of graduates in the standard time set, the possibility of providing pinpointed assistance towards the completion of a degree should be examined.
- **Focus on discontinuing students:** Although the discontinuation rate is not high, one should not give up on students who stop studying, since most either do return to studies or would like to, and there are ways to help them do so. In addition, the organizational-budgetary structure of incentives requires review. Currently, attention is given to those discontinuing their studies between the first and second years, and not between the second and third years. The question is whether the current structure contributes to the discontinuation of studies in the second (rather than the first) year, and what its implications are for both the students and the academic institutions.

Executive Summary

Background

The **National Plan to Expand Access of Arab, Druze and Circassian Students to Higher Education in Israel** was developed by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) – its Planning and Budgeting Committee, and is part of its multiyear programs launched in 2012/13. In a single decade, the number of Arab students studying towards any degree has more than doubled: from 22,543, in 2008 to 48,627 in 2018. In 2018, Arab students comprised 16.2% of all students in Israel, a rate that is still lower than the percentage of Arabs in Israeli society (20.9%). This is the fifth report in a series of evaluation studies conducted by the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) on the accessibility program.

The program developed with a view to the challenges faced by the Arab population, which are well-known both from the literature and the field. It relied on accepted models in Israel and around the world to enhance accessibility. According to CHE, the **accessibility program goals** are to increase the rate of Arab students in higher education and the rate of graduates, to decrease the difficulties encountered by Arab students in their studies, and to narrow the gaps between them and their Jewish counterparts.

Currently, the accessibility program is implemented via a special budget at all universities and academic colleges funded by the Planning and Budgeting Committee. Every institution has a student-support structure based on its own, and the students', characteristics and needs. These are the elements of support at the institutional level: scholastic and personal support of students in academic preparatory programs (integrative – for Arabs and Jews together, as well as distinct – for Arab students alone); the One Step Ahead program (preparation for studies and acquaintance with the institution for those admitted to Bachelor's studies, held in the summer before the start of the school year); integration into academia (scholastic, personal, and social support, mainly for first-year students); and career centers. On the national level, students may receive a scholarship, whether from Irteka (for Bachelor's students) or based on merit for Master's research students, doctoral students, and post-doctoral students; and also upon joining an academic faculty (Maof scholarships).

The Study

Goal

The study had three main goals:

1. Examine the study characteristics of Arab students
2. Learn the extent of their reliance on the types of assistance offered by the national plan
3. Evaluate the perceived contribution of program elements to participants

Method

A telephone survey was conducted of a representative sample of 1,047 Arab students who applied for an Irteka scholarship (for Bachelor's degree students) in the 2014/15 school year. There were 825 survey respondents (208 recipients, 617 non-recipients; 79% of the sample). The survey was conducted in 2018, some three years after the students began their Bachelor's studies. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic, the language in which most of the students chose to respond. The data refer to all the respondents.

Main Findings

Findings

- 89% of the students began their academic studies a year or more after completing high school.
- In the students' opinion, the entirety of the assistance they received met their needs moderately (an average of 5.2 on a scale of 10). Financial aid was perceived as the most helpful (cited by 52% of the respondents), followed by scholastic assistance (18%), social/cultural activity (11%), and guidance in their third year from the dean/counselor (7%).
- Not all the students felt that the assistance had been adequate. The main forms of assistance they cited in this respect were financial aid (31%), guidance (22%), and scholastic assistance (17%).
- Of those pursuing the three-year Bachelor's program (vs. the four-year one):
 - About half (54%) completed the degree in the standard time (three years). The greatest variation

between students who did or did not complete their degree in the standard time was explained by the variable of field of studies: social science students tended to finish in the standard time more so than mathematics, science, and humanities students.

- No correlation was found between the receipt of assistance offered by the accessibility program and the completion of a degree in the standard time. The lack of correlation may be due to hidden characteristics that we could not control for in this study. It may well be, therefore, that without any assistance, the extent of students completing their degree in the standard time would have been lower.
- A large number of Arab students in an institution of higher learning correlated positively with the completion of a degree in the standard time, and negatively with the receipt of varied assistance of the accessibility program. This finding may be indicative of social networking and substantial support from peers – leading to considerable success in studies, and speaking against the need for formal assistance in these institutions.
- A sixth of the respondents made great changes in the course of their studies: 5% changed fields, 4% changed academic institutions, and 6% discontinued their studies.
 - Those who changed their field or institution had relatively better admissions characteristics, apparently lending them more options and more self-confidence to make the change.
 - A relatively high rate (44%-61%) made changes in their second year (rather than the first).
 - Half the students who discontinued their studies returned to study, and most said that they were interested in doing so.
- In retrospect, a substantial rate (41%) felt that that they should have improved their Hebrew before embarking on studies. The majority (61%) believed the same of English. This finding is supported by the high rate (83%) of students who were obliged to take an advance English course in order to earn an exemption from it during their bachelor's studies. Very few students (4%-5%) received assistance to improve their command of the languages as part of the accessibility program.
- Irteka scholarship recipients pursuing a Bachelor's degree, to a greater extent than non-recipients, assessed the entirety of the assistance as meeting their needs (6.8 vs 4.7 respectively, on a scale of 0-10). However, a lower percentage of Irteka recipients than non-recipients completed their degree in the standard time (49% vs. 56%).

- Among respondents who completed the three-year Bachelor's degree and were employed at the time of the survey:
 - About half (54%) were employed in an Arab locality or Arab-speaking environment.
 - A third (33%) were employed in jobs not requiring a college education nor related to their field of studies.

Recommended directions to develop the accessibility program

The accessibility program is dynamic and still being developed. It is impacted by two-way processes: from headquarters down to the educational institutions, and from institutional changes that reach up to headquarters and are disseminated among all institutions. The academic institutions enjoy a good deal of freedom in implementing the program and of flexibility in the choice of their operational mode and student-support elements. These are determined by their own and the students' needs and characteristics, and the number and proportion of Arab students at each establishment.

Ongoing learning on the implementation of the accessibility program yielded the following directions for continued development:

- **Preparation for academia:** For many of the students who started to study a year or more after high school, it is a good idea to regard the interval as an important maturation period allowing them to prepare for integration into academia, to improve their soft skills, learning skills, and command of Hebrew and English, and to make informed decisions about which institution of higher learning to attend and the field of study to pursue.
- **Provision of high-quality, adjusted assistance:** Given the student reports of unmet needs despite the availability of varied forms of assistance, the following should be emphasized:
 - Ongoing monitoring of a student's situation, several times a year
 - Help to students so that they are aware of and take advantage of the existing assistance
 - A review of the adequacy of assistance, in terms of extent and diversity
 - Provision of professional, high-quality assistance, adjusted to personal needs

- **Increase in the number of graduates completing their degree on time:**
 - The accessibility program focuses on integration into academia. Given that only about half of the Bachelor's students in the three-year course complete their degree in the standard time (vs. 61% of Jewish and other students), there appears to be a need for pinpointed assistance towards the completion of a degree to help students meet all their study requirements and reduce the rate prolonging their studies.
 - The question of whether there should be a different definition of "standard time to complete a degree" for students whose mother tongue is not Hebrew should be addressed.
- Focus on discontinuing students:
 - Although the discontinuation rate is not high, one should not give up on students who stop their studies since most of them either return to study or would like to do so, and there are ways to help them.
 - The organizational-budgetary incentive structure requires review. Currently, attention is given to discontinuing students between the first and second years of a degree, not between the second and third years. The question is whether the current structure is a factor of discontinuation in the second (rather than first) year, and what the implications are of discontinuation for both the students and the academic institutions.