



**The Gateway to Academia Program:
Promoting the Integration of Young Bedouins in the Negev
in Higher Education
Summary Report**

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July 2021

This review was commissioned by the Council for Higher Education of Israel (CHE) and the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) and financed with the help of the Senior Department for Socioeconomic Development in the Bedouin Society of the Negev

S-194-21

Abstract

This report was written in response to a request by the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) at the Council for Higher Education of Israel (CHE) for a review of the Gateway to Academia Program. This program has been implemented as part of a broader plan for expanding access to higher education by the entire Arab population in Israel, and focuses on removing barriers and providing incentives to promote the integration into higher education of young Bedouins from the Negev. The review begins with background on the representation of Bedouin youngsters in higher education, goes on to summarize the barriers and challenges they face, presents the program structure and elements as well as findings of several studies about it, and concludes with recommendations and future directions.

Today, the representation of young Arabs in higher education in Israel is higher than in the past. Nevertheless, there are still significant gaps in their participation in the academic arena relative to their Jewish counterparts, particularly among the Bedouins in the Negev. The integration of Bedouin students in higher education involves overcoming multiple challenges, including the high admission requirements compared to the candidates' educational achievements; lack of guidance and counseling, for example with regard to selecting academic disciplines; skills and knowledge (including languages) that are below the standard required; a "Jewish" institutional environment not always hospitable to sociocultural student diversity; poor economic status that hinders persistence in higher education studies; difficult physical access, mainly due to the lack of adequate public transportation; deficient online access (relevant mainly during the COVID-19 pandemic); and unique cultural barriers facing Bedouin female students.

Several surveys have been conducted among participants in the Gateway to Academia Year – the first year of the program that serves as an introduction to undergraduate studies as well as among Bedouin students already enrolled in higher education institutes in the Negev (regardless of the program). The surveys highlight the students' positive experiences with the program and the relative advantages it offers. These include improved self-efficacy; the development of maturity and optimism regarding the ability to complete higher education studies; stronger sense of belonging to the academic institute; and increased motivation for integration into Israeli society on an equal basis.

It was also found that the participants profited mainly from the following types of assistance: studies in small and separate classrooms; counseling by the program staff; extensive tutoring in academic writing; developing language skills in Hebrew (but much less so when it comes to English); and particularly the generous economic support provided in a variety of channels (stipend, scholarship, and travel expenses).

Nevertheless, the program participants also indicated several barriers, such as insufficient public transportation; language difficulties in communicating with the faculty; shortage of learning

infrastructure in their hometown or village; financial concerns; learning skills not suitable enough for the higher education environment; and heavy workload due to the multiple tasks in the supplementary classes and skill improvement courses they are required to complete. Following the transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, additional difficulties emerged given the lack of adequate physical and technological infrastructures for remote learning, as well as digital gaps. Finally, the surveys indicate that the number of students included in the program hitherto is lower than expected, that their starting point is weakened, and that their academic achievements are relatively low.

Given this complex picture of the perceived contribution of the Gateway to Academia Program, the partial uptake of the various supportive services that it offers and the difficulties and challenges still facing it, this report lists several recommendations for its optimization: making information about the program more accessible to the relevant target population; retaining the students' allocation into small and separate classes; providing more personal counselling to the students and monitoring their learning situation, with emphasis on continuity and persistence; retaining the economic support; improving language skills; addressing the public transportation challenges; and developing infrastructures for remote learning. In order to specify the most essential types of assistance provided by the program and the interventions that would contribute most to its effectiveness, we recommend a follow-up study of program participants in their first year of undergraduate studies (the program's second year).