

## EQUITY, ACCESS TO AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: REPORT OF CURRENT POLICIES IN PRACTICES IN ISRAEL

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**Abstract:** The Israeli society is diverse, both ethnically and economically. Its population is composed of 22% non-Jewish minorities including Muslims, Bedouins, Christians and Druze, most living in low socio-economic locations. Among the Jewish majority, there are ultra-orthodox (8%) and Ethiopian-origin (1.5%) groups, as well as populations living in geographic and low socio-economic periphery. Such a diverse society brings challenges in terms of equity, access and democratization of higher education. The present report, performed for the Love.Distance project aims to review and summarize the main practices and policies in Israel on this topic.

*Keywords:* Higher Education, Distance Learning, Equity

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In Israel the only accrediting body, by law, is the Israel Council for Higher Education (CHE). There are currently 62 budgeted academic institutions: 9 universities, 32 academic colleges, 21 academic teacher training colleges and 12 non-budgeted colleges. The primary difference between a university and college is that only a university can confer doctorate degrees and therefore is usually more research oriented than the colleges, which tend toward more teaching oriented. There are four non-degree post-secondary education schools which award Professional Certificates, and six non-Israeli certified colleges accredited by international bodies outside of Israel. Seven foreign colleges and universities have Israeli campuses.

Historically, the universities opened in the 1920's and continued in accordance with the growing demand for higher education. In the 1970's non-university institutions were established and, along with existing institutions and teacher training seminaries, went through a process of accreditation to be able to award academic degrees.

In the 1990's the Council of higher education (CHE) amended the CHE Law to enable the opening of academic and technology colleges, and colleges not budgeted by the state.

All institutions of higher education must be non-profit organizations in Israel by law.

## 1. Methods

### **Methods used, statistics consulted, information retrieved from national agencies, etc**

Statistics and information have been retrieved from government and public agencies, the Israel CHE and the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and information from key persons at Ono and Levinsky.

## 2. Affordability

**What are the different, major forms of higher education financing (e.g. higher education as a public investment–public financing versus higher education as a private in the country? What are the implications of these different policies and economic models? Can students apply for public scholarships? Are there housing facilities available for students?**

The tuition of all public institutions of higher education in Israel that are budgeted by the state is set by the government. Annual government-set tuition for a bachelor's degree is currently NIS 10,259 and for a master's degree NIS 13,863. All budgeted institutions receive additional government subsidies according to national priorities but are also limited in the amounts of students that can be recruited to each faculty, in faculty salaries and more.

Non-budgeted institutions determine their own tuition fees, which are usually about three times as much as the government-set fee but can differ from program to program and from one institution to another. They are not supported by government funding and can in most, but not all cases, recruit the number of students they wish and pay their faculty and administration competitive salaries. Non-budgeted institutions do not receive government funding.

The Ministry of Defence set up a unit for those who completed military or national service that provides counseling and tuition support for all those eligible. The unit provides tuition support for persons in both pre-academic programs and in bachelor's degree programs. In addition, the unit provides further support to special target groups, such as those in Israel's geographic and social periphery and students who study for teaching certificates, in accordance with national priorities. It should be noted that the target groups ultra-Orthodox and Arab communities are mostly exempt so generally do not serve in the military or national service.

Active career security personnel are also eligible for support from the military in academic studies. Usually they must complete their studies in a shorter time span than civilians but since they receive extensive financial support, they do not need to work during their studies.

Students from Arab communities are eligible to apply for various scholarships, both public and private. The CHE established the Irtika scholarship for Arab students. Scholarships are available to men in the Druze community who, unlike the Muslim Arab community, serve in the Israel Defense Forces.

As Israel suffers from a shortage in teachers, the Ministry of Education offers conditional loans to teacher's education students. Loans given become grants after two years of working as a teacher in public school.

Other public volunteer groups support tuition for students, such as Friends of IDF, that supports young people released from combat or combat support units based on socio-economic criteria, Perach from the Ministry of Education, that provides tuition support in exchange for volunteer mentoring, and Mifal Hapayis that supports persons from low socio-economic backgrounds, lone soldiers, and students of all faiths. Many private NGOs and volunteer groups also support tuition for eligible various population groups for students of all sectors.

New immigrants of the Jewish religion are eligible for tuition payments provided by the Israel government's Ministry of Absorption Student Authority in accordance with tuition for public budgeted institutions. This public financing is part of a long-standing initiative by the government to promote immigration from Jewish communities around the world to Israel. As new immigrants, the financing applies to students of Ethiopian descent and is more extensive than for other immigrants.

Most academic institutions provide scholarships based on merit and scholarships based on socio-economic status. Some, like Ono Academic College, provide scholarships for specific target groups, such as Ethiopian Israel and ultra-Orthodox, each of whom is eligible for extensive scholarships aimed to encourage their participation in HE. At Levinsky College of Education there are scholarships for excellence and for students with financial needs.

Many, but not all universities and colleges have dormitories for students. Ono Academic College and Levinsky College currently do not have student dormitories. However, now private organizations are starting to build dormitories in cities where there are several academic institutions, such as in Kiryat Ono, which enables students to live close to campus.

The majority of students work during their term of studies in order to supplement their income. In order to facilitate this, and to be more efficient in the use of the institution's resources, Ono Academic College holds daytime studies and afternoon-evening study tracks. Levinsky College holds one-day-a-week study tracks for master's degrees and for academic students in career change studies. These programs include online courses.

Most HEs have resource development staff that raise donations to support the institutions, their facilities, their faculties, research institutes and their students.

### **3. Accessibility**

**To what extent can citizens access higher education? Do all citizens have the opportunity to access higher education or is higher education only accessible to certain segments of society and, if so, who decides who has access and who does not? Is there a national method for application? Are there specific/regional enrollments for people with specific characteristics?**

All citizens can apply to a higher education institution in Israel, and each institution decides its terms of acceptance. The acceptance criteria include a matriculation or equivalent high school certificate. The exception to this is the Open University, which is also the only HE allowed to teach full online degrees: anyone can study at the Open University. All students must pass a standard English academic test before graduation, and therefore are required to study English courses until they reach the required level.

All campuses must be physically accessible to all students. Several years ago, Ono Academic College and Levin-sky College added all that was necessary to make the campuses fully accessible from a physical standpoint, as did other academic institutions, and all public institutions in Israel for that matter.

Most academic institutions hold studies in Hebrew, with a minority of HEs holding studies in Arabic. The implications are that Arabic speaking students, having been raised in an Arabic speaking school system, need to raise their Hebrew language skills or study in Arabic language HEs.

Most HEs do not offer full bachelor's degree programs in English, but rather one year overseas-abroad courses, and therefore in 2019 there were only 1.4% international students studying in Israel. The CHE and Erasmus+ Israel have currently set internationalization as one of their main

national priorities. In 2019, the CHE announced it in-tends to double the number of international students to 24,000 by 2022. The CHE approved 26 English-language courses of study to mirror existing Hebrew-language course offerings in fields such as STEM, entrepreneurship and innovation, agriculture, urban studies, environmental studies, Judaism, Islam and Middle East studies which will include seven bachelor degrees and nineteen master's degrees.

In order to increase the number of eligible candidates for higher education, most HEs offer mechina pre-academic preparatory programs, for students who did not successfully complete their high school matriculation exams, new immigrants or any who want to increase their chances of being accepted to academic programs by raising their grades. The mechina programs significantly increase the number of eligible students for all HEs.

A standard, nationally accepted psychometric exam is required for university acceptance and acceptance to many colleges or to some of their programs, in lieu of entrance exams. Potential students often take private courses to study for psychometric exams in order to increase their scores and chances for acceptance to specific programs, when required.

Regarding opportunity and decisions regarding accessibility, the CHE from time to time established programs to promote cultural/sectorial accessibility to various sectors of the population, which apply to budgeted institutions. The programs focus on steady, year by year enlarging of the budgets for the various elements that pro-actively encourage opportunity for excluded populations to enter higher education. These include providing budgets for more coordinators, more pre-academic preparatory programs, more scholarships and especially merit-based scholarships for excellence, tutorial support, language support, and cultural support needed to introduce and familiarize students with the Israeli system of higher education. CHE programs include target populations for persons with special needs – physical accessibility, the Jewish Ethiopian-Israeli (immigrant) community, Jewish ultra-Orthodox community, various Arab communities, especially from East Jerusalem, and Israel's development towns, called "periphery".

At Ono, a non-budgeted institution, we have established programs for target communities that sometimes pro-mote mainstreaming, such as for Ethiopian-Israelis and persons with special needs, but for other communities, namely the ultra-Orthodox community and the Arabic speaking communities, most of the programs are separate but equal, and take into consideration the special needs of each community.

Ono appointed experienced and accepted members of the Ethiopian Israeli and immigrant communities, Arabic speaking communities and Haredi communities to recruit and support

these communities in their unique and individual needs. The Matana Academic Support and Accessibility Center supports students with special needs.

The ultra-Orthodox community is taught with gender separation in a separate facility, and takes into consideration religious needs, such as special vacation days as necessary, code of dress, and generally men teach men and women teach women.

For Arabic-speaking communities language barriers are taken into consideration. Some classes are taught in Hebrew with in class translators to Arabic, some are taught online with Arabic subtitles, and some are taught at hours that are especially convenient for the Arab community, such as Friday afternoons, but not acceptable in the Jewish communities. Holidays are respected, for both classroom and exam times.

Ono's Matana Academic Support and Accessibility Center was established to enable students with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, or any other difficulty to study in the best possible way, by providing personal support, courses, counseling and assistance, assistive technology and learning aids, and access arrangements for exams, that enable him/her to complete an academic degree. Matana established accessible courses for English language skills.

A major key to success with target communities, especially for persons with special needs, is a multi-disciplinary staff, dialogue with the staff and students, listening, and adopting new ways of study to enable students to succeed.

Levinsky College of Education has an inclusive policy that has led to the development of specific programs for target populations.

For the Jewish ultra-Orthodox community, Levinsky College established a BED bachelor's degree in education program for women that already studied for three years in an ultra-Orthodox teacher's seminary and have a teaching certificate, to enable them to acquire an academic degree. The classes are held separate from other target groups. The content is adjusted to make it appropriate for the ultra-Orthodox worldview and taught exclusively by female lecturers, in accordance with the religious wishes of the community.

For Arabic speaking students Levinsky designated a faculty member to be responsible for this target population. She provides linguistic mediation and supports the integration of students by helping them use appropriate concepts. In addition, help and guidance is given to support both emotional and cultural integration.

For students with disabilities, Levinsky College established the Meitar Multi-Disciplinary Guidance and Support Center. Meitar is a college center designed to support students with ADHD and learning disabilities, students with vision, hearing or physical disabilities, and new immigrants whose native language is not Hebrew. The Meitar Guidance Center helps in building accessible courses. Each Meitar supported student has a mentor to mediate and help with the various challenges.

#### **4. Participation**

**To what extent are citizens participating in higher education? Equal opportunity of access does not automatically equate to equitable participation. What is the national and local data on enrolment evolution? How about the evolution in terms of percentages of the population with Bachelor, Master of PhD level?**

About 316,400 Students are currently pursuing academic degrees in Israel, which is almost 50% of the relevant age cohort in Israel (2018-2019) – 73% bachelor's, 23% master's and 4% PhD degrees.

46% of Israelis aged 19-64 hold an academic degree, number two among OECD countries (OECD average: 32%).

59.5% of all students are women.

16.9% of students are Arab (68.9% are women).

3.8% of students are ultra-Orthodox (69.8% are women).

1% of students are of Ethiopian origin (total population 151,800).

In general Israel has seen a decline in HE except for ICT (Information and Communications Technology), which from 2013-2017 has grown by 75%.

#### **5. Quality**

**To what extent does the quality of teaching and learning exist in the country? Is quality assurance accomplished via peer-based accreditation agencies or government agencies or other models?**

All accreditation is awarded by the Israel Council for Higher Education, which is a government appointed body. “The Council for Higher Education (hereinafter – the CHE) is a statutory corporation that was established by the Higher Education Law 5718-1958 (hereinafter – the CHE Law) and it is the State institution responsible for higher education in Israel, carrying out its functions according to the authorities vested in it by this Law. The Council for Higher Education draws up policy for the higher education system in the State.” The Council established a system for the assessment of quality, in addition to the examinations undertaken prior to accreditation of new institutions or new units, that carries out periodic assessments of quality in existing fields of study. All HEs have an institutional center to enhance teaching quality and publish annual quality assessments from questionnaires given to students. Lecturers with low assessments receive help and participate in designated workshops. Teaching quality assessment is part of the promotion process for faculty.

## **6. ICT**

**Are there specific regulations on the use of ICT in Higher education? How about in your university?**

In Israel, the relative percentage of students studying for bachelor’s degrees in ICT subjects grew by 75%, to 8.1% of the population, making Israel fifth in the OECD in this regard.

The Israeli CHE promotes using ICT in HE teaching and learning. The policy is based on the perception that ICT use enhances teaching quality, accessibility and Israel’s HE reputation. Therefore, CHE promotes collaboration among HEs in order to implement digital learning. There are two main HE partnerships in Israel: MEITAL, a member of this consortium and Digital Israel.

MEITAL Inter-University Center for E-learning’s (IUCEL) main goal is to assist HEs in promoting the use of learning technologies in HEs in Israel. MEITAL’s members include 20 academic colleges as well as Israel’s eight universities. MEITAL, whose operations focus on activities, community and learning technologies, leads this community of HEs in a range of activities, including working groups, round tables on pedagogic and operational areas, examining new learning technologies and offering key infrastructure services to institutions, while making a wide range of learning technologies available to members. MEITAL works to improve the connection between teaching, learning and technology, bringing together the leading experts in



higher education, with the goal of improving and enabling quality technological academic instruction. MEITAL is an active partner in this LoveDistance Erasmus+ project.

Digital Israel was established in 2017 as a joint venture of the CHE and the Ministry of Social Equality as the National Digital Israel Initiative, a national plan for digital literacy. It aims to improve digital literacies in Israel by "harnessing the potential of the digital revolution to advance information and communication technologies" in particularly for disadvantaged populations, in order to narrow social gaps and to make government smarter, faster and more accessible to citizens. This joint strategic initiative aims to create free online courses in order to enable everyone in Israel who so wishes to acquire education and move ahead, "remove social barriers and harness digital tools for real social change". So far Digital Israel has developed some 50 courses out of 80 digital courses that have been approved. These courses have been added to the worldwide edX website and to the national "Campus" platform.

Regarding regulations, as part of the Digital Israel initiative, the CHE approved the regulation of digital learning in Israeli academia. If digital courses reach one third of the total degree, it will be possible to complete the degree with classroom courses requiring two days a week, instead of three days a week which is normally required of all bachelor's degree students.

According to 2018/19 Data:

Approximately 50,000 students are enrolled in digital academic courses.

Approximately 10,000 students have successfully completed these courses.

Approximately 25% of the students who finished these courses are above the age of 40 (14.7%) or under the age of 20 (8.7%).

By way of comparison, in other courses of study, only 5% of students are above the age of 40 and 5.4% are under the age of 20.

The CHE limits online courses to one third of degree studies.

At Ono the Information Systems and Computer Departments provide personal support, workshops and training for faculty and students for distance learning. The online technology shows who logs in to the courses and who does not, and faculty, staff or student mentors initiate contact with students who seem not to be following the online lecture programs in order to solve problems and provide immediate solutions.

At Levinsky there is a center for enhancing ICT which offers a wide range of workshops and assistance to the academic staff in order to use high level ICT for HE pedagogical purposes.

Though during the Covid19 period, when gatherings in Israel are prohibited and the regulations require most persons to stay home, most HEs are changing to almost full distance learning. This will be allowed only for the duration of the Covid19 restrictions, and the temporary online courses studied during this period will not be considered as such in calculating the number of online courses for the degree.

## 7. Conclusions

Israel HE policymakers define disadvantaged population inclusion and promoting ICT in teaching and learning in higher education as priorities for two main purposes: narrowing social and geographic gaps and enhancing the quality of academic teaching in order to achieve accelerated economic growth.

These two goals don't always go together. Our experience has shown that students from target populations find it difficult to study in digital environments, do not have full access to digital learning infrastructure and resources and often lack the skills and ability needed to learn through digital environments. In order to take advantage of enhanced quality of teaching, these barriers must first be addressed. That is why it is so important to promote projects that emphasize promotion of digital literacy of the target populations in the project so that the potential embodied in technology for integrating and promoting disadvantaged populations will indeed be realized and not become another component that expands social gaps.

Barriers include:

- Scholarship access for all students - some are only for Jewish populations
- Language barriers exist for those who are not fluent in Hebrew
- Religious-cultural barriers, especially for ultra-Orthodox populations and for Arabic speaking populations
- Physical distances to campuses can be a deterrent to studying for professions of choice
- CHE limitations of online courses for only one third of courses for bachelor's degrees

## Resources

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