



Higher Education for Arab Citizens of Israel Realities, Challenges and New Opportunities¹

Executive Summary

Education in general and higher education specifically are central elements of Israel's long term advancement. Higher education is not only the number one factor for entering Israel's labor market, in large measure, it also serves as a pivotal point at which the various groups and segments of Israel's diverse and divided society mix.² Today, Israel's Arab citizens (approximately 20.6% of the population) lag behind the mainstream population on every level of educational achievement and integration into the workforce. Within Israel's Council for Higher Education (CHE) and the Israeli government there is growing awareness of both the social and economic costs incurred as a result of low rates of Arab participation in higher education, and the fact that gaps will not close fast enough without strategic corrective measures.

Over the past few years, there has been a significant increase in government efforts to close gaps in socio-economic status, employment and higher education. An Authority for Economic Development of the Arab, Druze and Circassian Sectors ("Authority for Economic Development") was created within the Prime Minister's Office and is making relatively large allocations to enhance employment and economic development within Arab society. The Trajtenberg Committee recommendations following the social justice protests of 2011 included measures to enhance Arab access to higher education. The most focused effort on higher education, though, is the CHE's Planning and Budgeting Committee's "Six-Year Plan to Enhance Accessibility of Higher Education for the Minority Population in Israel", further

¹ In this paper figures relate to those institutions of higher education – both universities and colleges - that are budgeted by the Israeli Council for Higher Education's Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC or VATAT in Hebrew), 28 in all. We would like to extend our thanks and appreciation to Merav Shaviv and the staff at the Council for Higher Education's Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) for their generosity in sharing their data, insights and expertise.

² At the JFN Conference in March 2012 Prof. Manuel Trajtenberg, Chairman of the CHE's Planning and Budgeting Committee, defined this issue as one of Israel's "strategic priorities" and said "if there is a single place where the fragmented Israeli society can become a shared society, I think this place is university campuses".

detailed below, which provides a national framework for closing gaps along the entire higher education path and is launching officially in January 2013.

The issue of access to higher education has also been a central component in Israel's accession process to the OECD, whose Employment, Labor and Social Affairs Committee (ELSAC) identified Israel's need to enhance employment opportunities for disadvantaged populations (mainly Arab and Haredi), and its need to close gaps in education, as two of the top five areas for improvement.³

This executive summary provides a brief overview of the social and economic implications of this issue and outlines the principal government efforts to address them. For greater detail, also on the civil society initiatives and follow up opportunities, please review the complete Briefing Paper, [available here](#).

Higher Education—A Critical Gateway

In recent years, a number of studies have shown that higher education is a prerequisite to advanced, quality employment in Israel's highly developed job market, and therefore a precondition to reducing poverty and fulfilling the economic potential of Israel's entire citizenry. According to the Authority for the Economic Development, 51% of all Arab families and over 62% of all Arab children live in poverty, compared with 15% and 23.8% among the Jewish community, respectively. On a national level, Arab citizens contribute only 8% of Israel's total GDP, with an estimated annual loss of around NIS 31 billion to the economy.

While Arabs with university or graduate degrees still have greater difficulty integrating into the job market compared to their Jewish peers, higher education is still the factor that makes the greatest difference. According to data collected by the Authority for Economic Development, the employment rate for Arab citizens (between ages 18-66) is 44%, an average of 66% for men and 22% for women. Of these, however, Arabs with higher education are employed at a rate of around 81%. Yet, Arabs currently comprise only about 12% of all Bachelor's degree students.⁴ This rate drops even further to 4-8% in more advanced degrees and a mere 2% among academic staff.

Numerous barriers impeding entrance, academic success and graduation of Arab students in Israeli academia have been identified beginning earlier than higher education and lasting through the academic experience. Inadequate high school education and language barriers contribute to the difficulty Arabs face in attaining a complete matriculation certificate (the series of academic exams necessary to be eligible for higher education) as well as in performing well on the heavily weighted psychometric examination. Additional barriers include geography—most Arabs live in Israel's periphery where public transportation is scarce; minimum age restrictions in various fields of study—Arabs are

³ Israel was required to submit a progress report on these issues within two years of its acceptance into the OECD. This report, which includes details regarding governmental responses to the OECD's recommendations, was published in June 2012 by the Ministry of Trade and Industry: <http://brookdale.jdc.org.il/Uploads/PublicationsFiles/OECD-Progress-report-ENG-September-2012.pdf> (higher education is discussed in chapter 5 "Addressing Barriers to Work for Minority Population Groups through Education".)

⁴ "A major difference between Israeli higher education and that of the UK or USA is that a Bachelor's degree in Israel is often specialized [...]. Educational programs, which prepare students for a certain vocation do not require the completion of a Bachelor's degree first, as in the United States. Instead, specialized education such as medicine or law starts directly; programs generally lasting longer than a normal Bachelor's degree and teaches this one area of study exclusively." Source: [Educations.com: Study Guide Israel](#).

exempt from military service and can begin their studies immediately after graduating high school; and economic barriers—Arab citizens are poorer on average and most available scholarships are conditional on military or national service. Finally, cultural factors result in Arab students being less prepared to navigate the higher education system and generally face a challenging cultural transition once enrolled, given they are usually two years younger than their Jewish peers and are experiencing their first time living outside their local community.

Government Response—New Strategic Investments in Education and Economic Development

A number of major governmental actions introduced measures since 2010 to close existing gaps and improve Arab citizens' access and successful integration into Israel's higher education institutions and job market, resulting in over NIS 3 billion in various allocations. Most significant for the purposes of this paper is the Six-Year Strategic Plan recently finalized by Israel's Council of Higher Education's Planning and Budgeting Committee which has been piloted over the last two academic years and is launching officially at national scale on January 10, 2013. Formally called the "Six-Year Plan to Enhance Accessibility of Higher Education for the Minority Population in Israel", this NIS 305 million plan provides an overarching strategy to remove barriers and address weaknesses along the path to higher education for Arab citizens—from high school through advanced degrees and into employment.

The Council of Higher Education's Six-Year Plan

The Six-Year Plan builds on proven program models developed by philanthropically-supported civil society and educational institutions throughout the country. It spans high school preparation, first year support programs, excellence scholarships for advanced degrees, and employment orientation.

High school preparation: To reach Arab high school students at the critical time when they need to plan for higher education, the PBC, in collaboration with JDC-TEVET,⁵ will fund education counseling centers in 21 Arab localities that will provide a wide variety services including counseling, subsidies for psychometric courses, Hebrew and English language proficiency, leadership skills and job fairs. To help Arab students' qualify and prepare for higher education, the Six-Year Plan invests in making pre-academic preparatory courses more accessible and attractive to Arab youngsters, including scholarships for participants going on to universities, funds to cover pre-academic course expenses, and an awareness-raising campaign to market pre-academic courses in Arab society.

Support services for first year students: Arab students enrolled in universities and colleges face challenges integrating into the system. The Six-Year Plan includes measures to reduce dropout rates, raise achievement levels, and ensure more successful transitions into higher education as well as planning for careers beyond. These include an intensive, short preparatory course funded for all first-year Arab students in the month prior to the beginning of their first academic year (in fundamental areas like Hebrew writing and cultural preparation); substantial on-campus group and individual mentoring and support services throughout the first year in academic and social areas; and a distance

⁵ [TEVET \(Hebrew initials for "Momentum for Employment"\)](#) is an organization created as a partnership between JDC-Israel and the Israeli Government in order to enhance employment opportunities to disadvantaged populations, with the understanding that employment is the key factor through which poverty can be reduced.

learning program through Open University that allows 95 Arab students to earn their first year in certain fields without the standard prerequisites and, as long as they have earned required grades, transfer to another university as second-year students with full credit.

Career counseling and advanced degrees' scholarships: The Six-Year Plan also includes career-development measures to raise Arab participation rates in graduate schools and among academic staff, as well as ensure meaningful transition into the job market. Universities and colleges will receive a budget to provide career development courses and services for second and third year Arab students, including CV writing, interview skills, and job fairs, among others. The PBC will offer a number of full scholarships (with some university matching) to excelling Arab students that continue on to advanced research, and three-year scholarships to integrate seven Arab academic staff members into different universities and colleges.

The current academic year, 2012-2013, will be the first in which the Six-Year Plan will be implemented at full scale. In October 2012, the PBC invited all state funded higher education institutions to submit funding proposals for programs aligned with the Six-Year Plan focus areas. To be eligible, each institution must develop a support and guidance system led by senior academic staff and create an Arabic version of their website. The PBC will evaluate the individual programs that were submitted and implemented by universities and colleges to assess success and projected impact, as well as identify gaps in the current model and areas that the government has difficulty funding (e.g. subsidies for transportation, scholarships and living expenses).

As stated above, many of the programs adopted by the Six-Year Plan were initially developed in the field by innovative non-governmental and philanthropic efforts (including many Jewish American sources and Israeli universities). Such efforts continue to be essential to address needs that are beyond the reach or are complementary to the plan. The full Briefing Paper provides a preliminary mapping of high-impact projects and initiatives currently in implementation. Some of these initiatives have already been adopted and scaled up by government matching, while for others it remains to be seen how implementation of the Six-Year Plan will impact their growth and that of the field in general.

Enhancing access to higher education for Israel's Arab citizens is an important part of realizing this population's potential to contribute to Israel's economic advancement and improving economic conditions within the Arab community. Today, the momentum and attention generated by the Six-Year Plan along with continued efforts among civil society actors have created unprecedented coordination and awareness around this issue in Israel. For North American Jewish leaders who wish to learn more or strengthen this effort, new opportunities include raising awareness among North American Jewish organizations and audiences, matching of government funds, information and insight-sharing among donors, civil society actors and the PBC, as well as opportunities to support complementary elements not included in the governmental plan.⁶ Please review the full Briefing Paper and contact the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab issues for additional details and follow up.

⁶ Examples of complementary areas not included in the Six-Year Plan are creating a more culturally sensitive environment, promoting shared-society work on campus, and providing scholarships for Bachelor Degree Arab students, among others.