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# English as a gatekeeper: Inequality between Jews and Arabs in access to higher education in Israel

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### ABSTRACT

Access to the universities and many colleges in Israel is conditioned on the attainment of a specific matriculation certificate that includes a passing grade in advanced level English. Arab students in Israel are required to study English in addition to Arabic and Hebrew, unlike Jewish students, who are not obliged to take a second foreign language in addition to English. This puts Arab students in an inferior position. An analysis of a large sample of high school graduates showed that the English requirement incurs larger gaps than two other subjects that were examined: history and math. Logistic regression models confirmed that the gaps in meeting the English requirement can help explain the Jewish-Arab discrepancy in enrollment in higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

According to recent data of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics wide gaps in access to higher education exist between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israel. For example, only 30% of Arab high school graduates enroll in higher education within eight years after completing high school, compared to 49% among Jews. Furthermore, in 2012 only 9% of the undergraduate students in Israeli universities and colleges were Arabs, although Arabs constitute about 20% of the Israeli population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). In this paper we develop and test the hypothesis that this gap can be attributed to, among other factors, the admissions policy of Israeli higher education institutions. All the universities and many colleges require a passing grade in advanced level English in the matriculation examination. This requirement is especially difficult for Arab students in Israel. First, Arabic features a state of diglossia in which the modern standard Arabic, known as literary Arabic, is used for writing, while spoken Arabic dialects are used for everyday communication. Arab students have to learn literary Arabic, in effect a second language, which complicates their learning processes. Second, all Arab students in Israel are required to study both Hebrew and English, in addition to Arabic, in contrast to Jewish students for whom Arabic is not a compulsory subject in the matriculation diploma. The majority of Jewish students, then, study only one foreign language, English, while all Arab students study two. Thus, we hypothesized that among Israeli high school graduates who are eligible for a matriculation certificate, Arabs are disadvantaged in comparison to Jews in their odds of attaining a passing grade in the advanced English examination and that this gap can contribute to explaining Arabs' underrepresentation in higher education.

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## 2. The Israeli context—compulsory and higher education

Education in Israel is compulsory and free from kindergarten to the end of secondary education (12th grade). The education system consists of five main types of schools: Jewish state secular, Jewish state religious, Arab state, Arab independent Christian and Jewish independent. The last mainly caters to the ultra-Orthodox communities.

The Jewish and the Arab school sectors are almost completely separate. Most Arab students study in Arab state schools, where the language of instruction is Arabic and the staff is Arab. Although financed by the state, these schools suffer from longstanding discrimination in budget allocations and services. On average, Arab schools have larger classes, fewer teachers per student, and less psychological and special education counseling than Jewish schools (Abu-Saad, 2004; Al-Haj, 1995). For political and historical reasons, the two religious minorities within the Arab population, the Druze and the Christians, enjoy better educational opportunities than the Muslims. The Christians benefit from a system of independent and selective schools, owned by Christian denominations, which are characterized by high educational standards and strict policies regarding students' behavior. Druze students study in a separate education system that was detached from the state-run Arab school system in the mid-1970s through a Druze initiative to preserve their identity and heritage. This step helped the Druze communities to obtain larger government budgets for their schools because of the state's interest in forming a distinct Druze identity consolidating the special relations of the Druze with the Jewish state (Al-Haj, 1995). Yet, their average achievement is generally similar to that of Muslims.

In addition to Jewish-Arab inequality, there is further inequality within the Jewish sector itself. Jews of Middle Eastern or North African origin (*Mizrachim*), the Jewish disadvantaged ethnic groups, are characterized by overrepresentation in the vocational tracks (Ayalon & Shavit, 2004) and in the less prestigious advanced subjects (Ayalon, 2006), and by underrepresentation in higher education (Feniger, Mcdossi, & Ayalon, 2014).

There is also inequality within the Jewish population between immigrants and the Israeli-born. The two major immigrant groups are natives of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and of Ethiopia, respectively. Whereas students of Ethiopian origin suffer from educational disadvantage at all levels, the achievements of FSU students in secondary education display a polarized pattern. They are more likely than native Israelis to drop out; but those who did not (the vast majority) scored relatively high on the matriculation examinations. Also, FSU immigrants tended to enroll in vocational tracks and to study science and technology more than Israeli-born students (Chachashvili-Bolotin, 2010).

### 2.1. High school curriculum and matriculation examinations

The curriculum in Jewish and Arab high schools is generally similar. It consists of a core of compulsory subjects and a variety of elective subjects. Compulsory subjects include civics, Hebrew (as a first language in the Jewish sector and a second language in the Arab sector), English, math, history, and literature. Arabic is a compulsory subject in the Arab schools, but elective in the Jewish ones. Bible is a compulsory subject in the Jewish schools only. There is a substantial difference between the Jewish and Arab high school curricula in two main respects. First, vocational education is common in Jewish schools, but relatively rare in Arab schools. Second, Jewish students can choose among a wide variety of elective subjects, whereas Arab students have very restricted options. These differences are a consequence of the different resources available in the two educational sectors (Al-Haj, 1995). Paradoxically, however, sociological and educational research, in Israel and in other countries, suggests that a scarcity of vocational tracks and a relatively restricted curriculum are associated with better educational outcomes and less inequality (e.g., Ayalon, 2002; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Shavit, 1990).

The matriculation examinations are administered by the Ministry of Education and are taken during the last years of high school, mainly in the 12th grade. The matriculation system is based on study units (each study unit is equal to three weekly hours per year or one weekly hour per three years). Examinations can be taken at either the basic level (2–3 units) or advanced level (4–5 units). To be eligible for a matriculation certificate, the student must take a total of at least 20 units and sit for exams in all compulsory subjects and at least one advanced subject. One failure is allowed. However, this basic diploma is insufficient for admission to a university, or to most academic programs in the colleges. That requires passing grades in the math exam (at least at the basic level) and an advanced-level English exam. These requirements were established by the universities in the early 1980s in reaction to a reform in the matriculation system in the 1970s.

### 2.2. Israeli higher education

The Israeli higher education system has undergone significant expansion and diversification since the 1990s (Ayalon & Yogevev, 2005; Menahem, Tamir, & Shavit, 2008). Until the 1990s, Israeli higher education consisted mainly of six publicly supported research-oriented universities, one scientific institution for graduate studies, and an Open University. Some colleges existed at that time, but they were not licensed to grant an academic degree and were not considered part of the higher education system. The six universities offer graduate and undergraduate programs and are considered quite selective. Admission to their undergraduate programs is based almost exclusively on a combination of the matriculation grade and a psychometric score. The latter is based on the Psychometric Test, which is a general aptitude test and required by the universities. Programs differ in their cutoff score, which mainly depends on supply and demand.

The expansion has been due to the creation of new collegiate institutions, *michlalot*, offering undergraduate studies, and to the grant of academic accreditation to the undergraduate programs of the older-established ones. The decision to expand

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