Higher education among minorities: The Arab case

Alean Al-Krenawi [a,b,*]

[a] *Achva Academic College, Arugot, Israel*
[b] *Spitzer Department of Social Work, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, PO Box 653, Beer-Sheva 84105, Israel*

A B S T R A C T

Coupled with ethnic moves from traditionalism toward modernity, the issue of minority groups in higher education has become central to societal transformation on a global level. This article aims to review the contributions to this special journal issue on higher education amongst Arabs in Israel, both evaluating how the authors shed light on one another, and how their work is positioned within the larger body of international research. Barriers to Arab access to and success in institutions of higher education in Israel are explored, and a special focus is put on the Bedouin-Arab community. The article presents recent attempts to improve both structural and cultural barriers to higher education in Israel, and proposes a far-reaching and internationally proven paradigm shift in higher education.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Minority groups in higher education

Higher education amongst minorities is an urgent and global matter. This is particularly true in contexts of strong social transformation: in those, education and change are interwoven in marked way. As in many nations, ethnic minorities in Israel are now experiencing a move from traditionalism to modernity. As these processes take place on a community-wide level, Israeli institutional structures are in the process of taking stock of their historical stances and evaluating how to move forward in a way that reflects the best interests of all constituencies. This national stock-taking is multifaceted, and involves sharp and honest analyses of both strengths and shortfalls, the former of which might be built upon and the latter of which must be ameliorated with coherent and comprehensive corrective planning. We have been provided in this special journal issue with ample proof of the intersectionality in Israel of educational issues – in particular, higher education – and the overall topic of societal transformation. In this concluding paper, we shall situate these authors' hot-off-the-press ideas within an international and longitudinal framework and briefly consider some ways in which each of the previous contributions sheds light on the others. In keeping with the main thrust of the volume, we shall then glance at changes that already have been made, and toward those yet to come. Apropos of this, we shall end by contributing to the discourse a new and far-reaching perspective that we hope will be helpful, practical and long lasting.

* Corresponding author at: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Spitzer Department of Social Work, PO Box 653, 84105 Beer-Sheva, Israel.
Tel.: +972 8 6472333; fax: +972 8 6472933.
    E-mail address: alean@bgu.ac.il

1.1. Minority barriers: Global perspectives

Minorities typically experience inequalities on a broad spectrum of life issues because of the overwhelming ramifications it entails for future functioning of both the individual and the society as a whole, education is a particularly notable example of such. The theme of barriers to minority school access and school performance has surfaced countless times in both the global and the regional literature. For instance, a pamphlet designed to encourage the retention of minority students in higher education noted many American students with aspirations that depend on receiving a university degree come to a halt in this process due to minority barriers (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Nearly half a century ago, Ogbu and Simons (1998) used cross-cultural data (including research in Israel) to identify critical factors in minority school performance. On the basis of their findings, Ogbu and Simons proposed a relationship between this performance and both structural barriers as well as "community forces" (the ways in which a minority community responds to discrimination).

Aside from difficulties in academic achievement, minority students in higher education have a higher incidence of dropout than non-minority students (Eimers & Pike, 1997). This dropout incidence is said to be associated with social integration as well as with academic integration, which if not achieved, leads to low persistence. Lack of academic integration leading to low persistence can also be observed in a study conducted by Allen (1999) aiming to determine factors affecting college student persistence. Minority persistence rates were affected mostly by their academic performance during college, as well as high school ranking and motivation to complete their college degree. We shall come back to the issues of persistence and dropout rates below, when we discuss the Bedouin community and its specific needs regarding higher education.

Term-time employment has also been implicated as a factor in inequality in higher education (Metcalf, 2003). Metcalf found that term-time working had a negative impact on academic success, and that certain students, such as female students – in particular female students from ethnic minorities – were more likely than other groups to be employed during their studies. These findings support the second recommendation made by Abu-Saad in this volume, found just below, that increased financial aid in higher education for Arab students is imperative. We shall now turn to the particular issue of minority barriers to higher education in Israel, a society in which ethnic minorities are experiencing rapid transformation.

1.2. Minority barriers: Israeli context

Some of the contributors to this special issue have honed in on the specifics of minority barriers, while others have simply used it as a starting point for their research conceptualizations. For instance, Abu-Saad writes forcefully about barriers to minority access to education (both primary and post-secondary) in Israel, asserting that the structural barriers in Israel for Arab students are far from haphazard, and can be traced back to policy decisions articulated in the early 1960s. His four-point call for change for the Arab sector, including higher educational quality for prior to the post-secondary level, more financial aid, the removal of university-admission age requirements and a move to end bias in admissions screening policies are addressed further on in the paper.

English-language proficiency requirements at institutions of higher education in Israel may serve as a barrier, or in Feniger and Ayalon's (this issue) terms, a "gatekeeper" to minority access to these places of study. The authors' reference to research that links the underrepresentation in higher education of minorities in Israel to differences in the quality of Jewish and Arab education throughout their educational trajectory (Al-Haj, 2003) touches on an issue that is brought up by a number of scholars represented in this volume (as well as by the authors of the Report by the Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Council for Higher Education, noted below). Nonetheless, Feniger and Ayalon's determination of no intentional denial of minority access to higher education in Israel throws a somewhat different light on the picture than that offered by Abu-Saad. Importantly, however, these scholars did find that the English requirement serves as a de facto barrier to minority access to higher education in Israel, a topic also to be further discussed later on in this paper.

Barriers come in many guises, some less obvious than others. In "The Paths of Return," Erdreich (this issue) employs an ethnographic approach to investigate the uses made of higher education by Palestinian Israeli women. Pointing out the ethnic enclavement that is characteristic of Israeli society in general, she shows that this population has been creatively managing its ethnic group's expectation of return from the university upon graduation by skillfully using the separation between home and university to "shape new conceptions of educated womanhood." Thus, the same ethnic enclavement that is considered – with some justification – by a number of researchers to be a breeding ground for unequal treatment has been shown by Erdreich also to provide the setting for societal change, one woman at a time.

Cinamon and colleagues have, in this journal issue, acknowledged the great strides taken in attainment of higher education by Israeli Arab women. Implicit, then, is the idea that some sorts of barriers were previously at play for this population. As this progress is noted to have not yet reached the labor market, the authors investigate conceptions of work and higher education among a subset of this population. Their finding that Israeli Arab women make use of higher education as a "woman's weapon" by which to achieve specific goals within their own communities is in line with a number of articles in this volume. Seginer and Mahajn (this issue)., for instance, write of the dyad of personal emancipation and desire for familial orientation that they found underlying the future orientation among Muslim girls in Israel. Moreover, at least three of Erdreich's four described "paths of return", echo of this type of change mechanism.

Moving to the Israeli field beyond this volume, Ayalon, Grodsky, Gamoran, and Yogev (2008) found that Arab and Mizrachi Jewish students experienced barriers in "first-tier," that is, university admittance, in Israel. They concluded that