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Abstract

The Global Village is changing and, with it, the higher education landscape. In the present article, the changes that have happened globally are reviewed, and particularly in Israel. In general, due to privatization and global competition, higher education is becoming more accessible; thus, there is a concern that quantity may come at the price of quality education. The article ends with an attempt to foresee what lies ahead for higher education in Israel.

Keywords

Israel, higher education, recent developments, universities, colleges

Higher Education in Israel: An Overview

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Abstract

The Global Village is changing and, with it, the higher education landscape. In the present article, the changes that have happened globally are reviewed, and particularly in Israel. In general, due to privatization and global competition, higher education is becoming more accessible; thus, there is a concern that quantity may come at the price of quality education. The article ends with an attempt to foresee what lies ahead for higher education in Israel.

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In recent years, the Israeli education system has undergone a revolutionary change, which has been called a genuine metamorphosis.

(Gur- Zeev, 2005, p. 3)

The changes in this field are reflected in multiple aspects of Israel's higher education system: a sharp rise in the number of students; a proliferation of accredited institutions; legislative changes; changes in regulatory policy, including changes in defined goals of higher education. (Davidovitch, 2011, p. 125)

Before delving into the Israeli higher education system with its problems, solutions, and future directions, a brief overview of the Israeli culture is in order. Israel is a small country in the Middle East, at the juncture of Europe, Asia, and Africa. It is marked by cultural diversity, has engaged in frequent wars with its Arab neighbors, and is shaped by huge waves of immigration from almost every country and region in the world. Israel consists of a mix of Jews and Arabs and is characterized by many languages and customs. The population is close to eight million, of which approximately 80% are Jews, and the rest mostly Arabs (Lavee & Katz, 2003). The Israeli culture embraces Western individualism and, not unlike other Western countries, emphasizes the importance of financial gains and personal achievements as yardsticks to one's success (Levin, 2011). The Israeli Jewish society was shaped by the Kibbutz' egalitarian ideology, wherein gender equality has been influential on women. Despite this egalitarian ideology, the Jewish society is characterized by male dominance in most settings (Barzilai, 2001; Kulik, 2005; Wood & Eagly, 2002). In the last decades, gender role definitions have been challenged in Western societies, among them the Israeli

society (Ritter, 2004). A recent Israeli study suggested the higher the level of a woman's education, the more liberal her gender role ideology (Kulik, 2005). Israeli culture is known to legitimize open communication, frankness, and straightforwardness (Margalit & Mauger, 1984; Sa'ar, 2007). Social expectations do not assume high levels of politeness, and Israelis have been described as having weak "expressive boundaries" (Shamir & Melnik, 2002, p. 12); i.e., individuals easily carry over their thoughts and feelings into their overt behavior (Ravid, Rafaeli, & Grandey, 2010). Jews, in general, and Israelis in particular, value higher education. As such, the Israeli higher education system has been nurtured since the inception of the state of Israel in 1948. This article reviews its state from the 1950s to the present day, and changes that may be on the horizon.

Higher Education

Access to higher education has been a major issue since the establishment of the first university in the 11th century, when universities functioned as ivory towers, permitting a select few to enter their gates, thus perpetuating social inequality (Guri-Rozenblitt, 2000). The end of the Second World War marked the end of that hegemony. During the 20th century the Western World has seen a massification of the bachelor's degree; and, in less than 50 years, the number of those holding an undergraduate degree has tripled (Davidovitch, Sinuany-Stern, & Iram, 2012). During the 1950s, a global trend occurred with a significant increase in awarded university degrees. In Europe, for instance, undergraduate degrees rose from 3-5% in the 1950s to almost 60% of the age group who achieved those degrees (Lindberg, 2007). Similarly, in

the United States, almost 65% of the relevant age group are students of higher education, as well as in Canada and Australia (Finnie & Usher, 2007). The situation in Israel mirrors the global trend.

The first two universities in Israel were established in 1924 and 1925. The increase in population of the young country [founded in 1948] and socioeconomic developments created a demand for higher education. Consequently, from the 1950s to the 1970s, a significant increase in the number of Israeli universities was observed. The Council for Higher Education [CHE] is the national body that oversees and regulates universities. In light of the growing demand, it opened the door for colleges to award academic degrees, which created a two-tier system: *universities* that focus on research and graduate studies, and *colleges* with a focus on undergraduate degrees, which would then serve as a sort of equality and social justice for students from the periphery by allowing them access to higher education (Davidovitch et al., 2012).

“Since the 1980s, Israel has been going through deep transformations of its leading policy paradigms, marked by economic liberalizations, privatizations, and deregulations... [geared to Israel’s] adaptation to the international competitive economy and privatization... [to foster] its rapid entry into the market driven global economy” (Menahem, 2008, p. 512). Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and until the 1990s, higher education in Israel was public and consisted of universities that were regulated by the CHE, having enjoyed high public esteem domestically and internationally. The 1990s brought major structural reforms that included privatization of institutions of higher education and development of a public college sector, resulting in the number of institutions quadrupling in less than five years (Menahem, 2008).

Global Massification of Higher Education

Since the 1980s, Volensky (2005) observed that globalization has been accompanied by market forces, competition, and free markets that affect, among other fields, education. Higher education is now influenced by capitalist reasoning and veneration of the principle of utility, all of which threaten the quality of higher education (Eckel, 2007). The struggle over the future of higher education is exemplified by one side desiring to impose market forces on academic life, while academe wishes to preserve regulatory mechanisms (Gur-Zeev, 2009). The main two issues are funding and extending

access to these institutions, which increase the number of students but consequently also increase the economic burden on the state, allowing for private institutions to open and to grant degrees. Unfortunately, that may result in qualitative differences among institutions (Eckel, 2007). Most Western countries follow the demand for greater access and open the higher education market to competition, which develops concurrently with the imposition of government supervision (Beerkens, 2008; Douglass, 2007). The scope of that supervision may vary, as some countries supervise all institutions of higher education; in others, only the private institutions are closely supervised by the state. In the United States, for example, the regulatory model is multi-leveled. Enrollment is on a national level, supervision is performed by the federal government, and private accreditation is performed by professional and regional entities (Bernstein, 2002).

Higher education, while planned and controlled, has evolved into a system with considerable freedom of operation (Tolofari, 2008). Higher education in South Korea has become widespread. While only 7% of the population’s relevant age group were enrolled in higher education institutions in the 1970s, today over 50% of all high school graduates continue to higher education, 95% of whom are enrolled in private institutions (Phelps, Dietrich, Phillips, & McCormack, 2003). China was known for strict supervision and control of its academic institutions, which catered to the elite. However, increased globalization, combined with the increase in the demand for higher education, led the Chinese government to allow the establishment of private institutions, and even foreign extensions into the education sector, thereby increasing decentralization and diversification (Mok & Ngok, 2008). In conclusion, countries all over the world (of which only a fraction were reviewed in this overview) are facing a new situation in which regulatory policy is inconsistent with the changing market, leading to privatization and marketization of the higher education system (Beerkens, 2008; Eckel, 2007).

Higher Education in Israel: Changes

Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Israeli students in higher education institutions more than doubled from 74,000 to 185,000. Higher education has become increasingly accessible to Israeli students, who are mainly in the age range of 20-24 (Shavit, Bolotin-Chachashvili, Ayalon, & Menahem, 2007). Since the enactment of the CHE in 1958, and through the 1990s, the regime of

higher education was unitary, state-sanctioned, and self-regulated. However, with the proliferation of the public colleges and private institutions, three sub-regimes now exist: the fully regulated public sector, the academically regulated Israeli private sector, and the deregulated international sector. Since the 1998 “Extensions Act,” foreign universities once authorized by the CHE could offer, through their extensions, learning opportunities to Israeli students, which would result in bachelor’s degrees recognized in Israel. However, the sharp rise in the number of colleges in the past 15 years has all but eliminated those extension degree-granting institutions (Menahem, 2008).

The decision of the Israeli CHE to allow both universities and colleges to offer undergraduate degrees resulted in a rise in the number of institutions of higher education, and the number of Israeli students rose from approximately 136,000 in 1996/7 to approximately 221,000 a decade later, a rise of 62% (Davidovitch et al., 2012). That resulted in what has been referred to as a bachelor’s degree, now seen as a degree for the masses, while graduate degrees are becoming more available and sought after by students, particularly since a bachelor’s degree is no longer seen as the coveted degree it once was. According to Israel’s CHE, the number of graduate students rose from 17,000 in the 1990s to 42,000 a decade later (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009). This is a result of permission granted to colleges in Israel to award both undergraduate and graduate degrees, and which resulted in diversification of program offerings, increased flexibility in class schedule, as well as accelerated tracks (Smith, 2008; Rothblatt, 1997). What brought about that graduate degree proliferation?

As part of the academic environment’s changes, theoretical graduate programs were established in the United States, with the idea to enable graduate studies designed to enrich professional knowledge, rather than the undergraduate degrees sought to provide a foundation for a career or research (Drennan & Clarke, 2009). In Israel, until the 1990s, the master’s degree was mainly a research degree extended over two years and required a thesis. Until then, only universities could confer a graduate degree, and the entire higher education system remained a small elitist system. Today, more than one-third of those with undergraduate degrees continue to graduate studies. Thus, programs that do not require students to engage in research were developed in an attempt to cope with the demand for advanced programs. “The ability of colleges to award advanced degrees has expropriated the universities’ monopoly status, and

significantly increased access to a Master’s degree with thesis in some colleges” (Davidovitch et al., 2012, p. 109).

Israeli Higher Education – Where Does It Go From Here?

Israel’s system of higher education has gone through a revolutionary transformation in recent years, that some entitled a metamorphosis. The changes involved various aspects of Israel’s higher education: there has been a sharp rise in the number of students, degree-granting institutions were created in large numbers, legislative changes, regularization and policy changes followed that increase, resulting in changes in how the entire purpose of academic institutions is perceived. Those dramatic transformations aroused many acute public debates. The debates centered, mostly, on one major issue: How can academic freedom, manifested in a free academic “market” (in the spirit of the liberal approach), be reconciled with the regulation of higher education, which, in Israel, is practiced by the CHE (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2015).

We are witnessing a paradigmatic change in Israel’s conception of education in general, and of higher education in particular. From a system that has touted the values of equality and universal access and viewed education as a means of social mobility, the system now champions individual interests, and values of competition and capitalism. A change in consciousness is evolving toward the privatization of public education. (Davidovitch, 2011, p. 131)

What can be done to address those concerns? Several strategies are available to governments (including the Israeli government). One option would be to institute governmental control via strict regulations, widespread supervision, and budgetary controls. The other is self-regulation, with the government maintaining remote supervision (Bernstein, 2002). No consistent policy has been adopted in Israel. One thing is very clear – today, with the global changes and advancements, Israel cannot reinstate higher education in its former “Ivory Tower.” There is no turning back! The most effective means to achieve that goal is to apply a qualitative assurance (QA) mechanism in higher education. And to those who recoil at the mention of QA, Davidovitch (2011) suggested, “Quality can be defined. Constructing identical academic foundations, defining curricular requirements, inspecting their quality and implementing identical exams in all

institutions are only several of the possible means of QA” (p. 133).

Privatization, originally an exclusive process of the colleges, began to filter through to the universities, which responded by adapting to the new business-oriented logic. For example, universities began to separate budgeted programs and unbudgeted programs, and those latter ones imposed higher tuition fees and often modified curricula and conditions of learning to fit the demands of the students who are seen as ‘consumers’. Market thinking sparked awareness of the clients’ needs and, additionally, penetrated into research. Teaching also was influenced by privatization, and adjunct faculty increased in number and were teaching more and more courses (Davidovitch & Iram, 2014). A concise explanation follows.

In Israel, no consistent policy has been officially adopted. Instead, what has been adopted is the policy of “holding the stick at both ends.” At this crossroads, several scenarios are possible. The first option is the policy of non-action, as research at universities diminishes and the number of students at private institutions increases. In one or two decades, we will attain high access and poor quality. That will be the result if the current trend continues in the absence of a clear policy and structure, uniform regulation. The second option is to view education as a means to improve social and economic status and, in the long term, as an economic investment of public value. This view adopts both the principle of access and the principle of quality. Its realization is possible by adopting the principle of equality and opening the market to competition, for both universities and private institutions, with equal funding, and, at the same time, by creating a mechanism of regulation and quality assurance that compels all academic institutions to meet high quality standards. (Davidovitch & Iram, 2014, p. 207)

Conclusion

Israel’s policy on higher education involves attempts to change higher education based on economic, social, and ideological considerations, as well as in the budgeting policy that sets quotas for funded students for the various institutions and disciplines. On the other hand, however, it allows free market forces to determine admission terms to the various academic disciplines according to supply and demand, with little concern about the academic and cognitive abilities required of students to succeed.

Whatever one may think of the present educational policy, there is no turning back. We cannot shut ourselves off from the effects of privatization, but we must adopt an approach that will employ built-in checks and balances to ensure this system works and its ‘products’ (i.e., the graduating students) can contribute to society once their education is completed and can have an acceptable financial future (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2015).

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