

Ariel University's Contribution to Opening the Gates of Higher Education in Israel

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Abstract

In Israel there are over 60 institutions of higher education. This figure includes eight universities, the youngest of which is Ariel University in Samaria. The case of Ariel University is an unprecedented case and that transitioned from being the largest public college in Israel to a full-fledged research university. This paper examines the approach to higher education accessibility in universities and colleges, and takes a close look at the dynamics of a specific organization — a college that transformed into a university in Israel — four decades after the last university was established (Ben Gurion University) and its impact on the higher education system over these four decades. This institution paved the way for the possible pathway of colleges, founded on the principle of access to higher education combined with the goal of excellence, to become universities. The question that emerged from the test of time is whether Ariel University has achieved the goals its founders defined for it? Paradoxically, the college that evolved on the principle of accessibility and opening the gates to higher education led other institutions on the path to excellence and to genuine competition between colleges and universities both, and played a leading role in establishing the groundbreaking view that each type of institution has its own function: the function of colleges is to teach, while the function of universities is to do research. This development offers a potential scenario for the transformation of the higher education system in general, where policy is driven by market forces.

Keywords: Higher education. accessibility, excellence, opening the gates, competition, policy, market forces

Introduction

The Academic College of Judea and Samaria (“the College”) was established in the late 1980s as a regional college and an extension of Bar Ilan University, and in the late-1990s became the largest of all public academic colleges in Israel. In 2003, the College was accredited by the Council for Higher Education (“the CHE”) to award academic degrees independently. Since its establishment, the College’s operations followed a university model by combining the two dimensions of higher education: intensive activity to create national demand for the institution and its degrees, alongside research activity. In practice, the College followed the approach adopted by Israel’s universities. This paper sheds light on one of the most important and dramatic developments of the previous decade in Israel: the opening of the gates to higher education in Israel and the establishment of a new university, as a result of the impact of market forces and without governmental intention or policy. This development offers a potential scenario for changes in the higher education system in general, in which social entrepreneurs and market forces drive policy. Since its establishment, Ariel University’s dual focus on accessibility and excellence made a very significant contribution to the higher education system overall — to colleges and universities both. The test of time sparks the question of whether

Ariel University has achieved the goals its founders defined? In its dynamic path in becoming a university, has a change occurred in the institution's balance between its goal of accessibility and its goal of excellence?

Milestones in the history of Ariel University

The Academic College of Judea and Samaria was established in 1982, and in 1990/1 began to function as an extension of Bar Ilan University. In 2003, the College became an independent institution.

From the College's founding statement:

"On... the 19th day of Nissan, 5742, scientists and educators of all the universities in Israel, public figures and men of action, have come to convene in Kdumim on this festive occasion to declare the founding of the College of Judea and Samaria. The declaration was preceded by a comprehensive, detailed discussion that was characterized by the uniform feeling that the national efforts to develop the country and its settlement should be combined together with the development and entrenchment of education, research, and education. The College is destined to develop into a spiritual and scientific Jewish center for the settlements that have and will be established in the future in the State of Israel and for the Jewish Diaspora. The founding convention elected an academic council comprising professors from all the country's universities, and a public committee will also be establishment, of friends of the College who are devoted to the idea of Zionist education and settlement. A broad public academic council will also be establishment. The founding convention stated several of its goals, among others:

- The College will develop academic teaching and research of the highest standard, but it is not intended to be merely another academic institution like all others, but a center that aspires to synthesize academic education and a national Jewish, Zionist consciousness.
- The College will intensify Zionist education and cultivate the values of love for the land and its settlement.
- The College will be a center of accelerated development of Jewish towns in Judea and Samaria.
- The College will assist in the development and establishment of employment opportunities for local residence and of an industrial economic infrastructure.
- It is the College's national mission to establish an educational system for the young Zionist leadership from among the students who come from all the Jewish communities in the Diaspora."

The milestones on the College's path toward accreditation as a full-fledged university are:

1982 – Evening classes were opened in Kdumim. Although the courses were taught by faculty from several universities, no university recognized the courses, which were mainly attended by local residents who lived in the area.

1987 – The College was accredited by the Ministry of Education as a regional college. A preparatory program was opened, initially under the tutelage of Bar Ilan University, and vocational training courses and re-training courses for trainees with academic degrees were opened on behalf of the Ministry of Labor. The College moved from its original location in Kdumim to the industrial zone in Ariel and expanded its operations, which included the establishment of the School of Practical Engineering.

1990-1991 – The first research institute was established, initially focusing mainly on natural sciences, and was staffed by new immigrants from the former Soviet Union countries. Several of the new immigrants who were hired by the research institute were later became members of the faculty. Over time, research activities expanded to include the faculty's research endeavors in all academic areas. The first conference of Judea and Samaria Research Conference was held in 1991. A technological incubator was established on the College campus jointly with Ariel municipality.

1992 – The College established a board of trustees, and executive board, and elected a president. A society of friends of the College and a senate were also established. Approximately two years after the first programs sponsored by Bar Ilan University were opened; the College opened its first departments that awarded academic degrees. Since then, a broad range of undergraduate programs was developed.

In the 1990s, the national goal of opening the gates of higher education was specifically intended to apply to colleges, which would focus on teaching, as these institutions did not conduct research. In response to this call, colleges created modified programs such as the B.Tech degree in engineering as a substitute for the B.Sc. degree typically awarded by universities. Among these colleges, however, the Academic College of Judea and Samaria became a driver of research activities. The College became a leader for all other colleges in many respects, and its unique achievements are the direct outcome of the policy defined by the institution's leaders: The College is the first extension of Bar Ilan University that developed independent programs such as

programs in engineering, health sciences, and medicine that were not offered by the parent university. Of the five extensions of Bar Ilan University, the College was the first that was accredited to open an undergraduate program in engineering, the first to open graduate programs, the first that was approved to grant the rank of professor, and the first college whose faculty members as advisors to doctoral students.

Representatives of the conservative university establishment such as Nehemia Lev Zion, Chair of the CHE in 2003 and Yossi Sarid, Minister of Education from 1999 to 2000 were challenged by Ariel's drive to become a university. The academic establishment later would take many steps to block the aspiration led by Yigal Cohen Organ, who became identified with the College in Ariel. Actions to hinder progress toward this goal included imposition of a limit to the number of students for which an institution was eligible for government funding, and other steps to obstruct the efforts to obtain university status for the College.

Efforts to gain accreditation as a university were launched in 2005, when the Sharon-Peres government declared that converting the College to a university was of "national importance," as a lever to strengthen higher education in the area. The CHE authorized a committee to draft recommendations on transitioning from college to university in 2005. The committee was headed by Prof. Altshuler, the Chair of CHE-Judea and Samaria. In its report, the committee stated that the College effectively already functioned as a university, and that a decision to upgrade the institution from a college to a university will develop the research performed by the education system in Israel. The CHE-Judea and Samaria, the entity in charge of all academic institutions in Judea and Samaria, decided that Ariel College would be granted temporary university status and would become known as a "university center." If the university center meets a series of conditions over the next five years, it would be granted permanent university status. Applications for university status submitted by other colleges in other areas in Israel were rejected on the grounds that no additional academic university was needed in the coming years.

The College's application for university status triggered a stormy debate in the government, where it was argued that there was no justification for establishing yet another university in the center of the country and that the decision to grant the College university status was motivated by political interests. The government ministers voted unanimously in favor of the establishment of a new university in the north. The CHE's responded as follows: "The Council decided in the past that it opposed the establishment of a committee to examine the possible transition of the Academic College of Judea and Samaria to a university, and views this decision as a grave step that constitutes intervention in the authority of the Budget and Planning Committee. Already six months ago the Council resolved that the composition of CHE-Judea and Samaria should be changed to ensure that it is composed only of members who effectively serve as members of the CHE-Jerusalem, and they only."

Om 2006, the Judea and Samaria branch of the CHE announced its decision to upgrade the status of the College to a university, conditional upon a series of steps, such as a larger number of faculties at the rank of professor, admission of doctoral candidates and other steps. Between 2006 and 2012 the College hired more faculty members, expanded its range of graduate programs, and reinforced infrastructure and made other improvements.

In 2012, Ariel was officially granted status as a university by Minister of Education Gideon Saar in 2012. Since then, Ariel University has continued its intense path of development and major efforts have been directed to establish a school of medicine. This initiative also sparked fierce opposition by the other universities, which argued that the graduates of Ariel's medical school would be unable to find jobs in hospitals, where the number of positions is limited. Despite the opposition, the School of Medicine was opened in 2020.

In this paper we focus on the aim of opening the gates to higher education, which spoke to the source of growth of the College, and the University today, in order to examine whether Ariel University has achieved the goals defined by its founders, and whether its prioritization of the goals of excellence and accessibility changed as the College transitioned to university status, obligating it to meet academic research targets.

Access to Higher Education in Israel

Mass immigration from the Former Soviet Union (FSU)

The birth of the College in the late 1980s coincided with a major national challenge sparked by a wave of mass immigration from the former Soviet Union. One million new immigrants, including older adults with academic degrees and youngsters who were motivated to earn academic degrees, revolutionized the demand for higher education in Israel. Their demand added to the demand of Israeli-born youngsters who sought to

earn a degree for the sake of their personal development and career opportunities. Although the wave of immigration functioned as a catalyst for the development of the CHE's new policy on access, the country's universities were unprepared to meet the burgeoning demand.

The newly established College in Ariel rose to the challenge posed by the enormous number of new immigrants, and responded to the call by Minister of Science Yuval Neeman to hire the immigrants who were physicians and scientists after the universities hired only small numbers. Incubators at the College were established and grew, and the College established the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Natural Sciences, whose departments were based mainly on new immigrant scientists. The College's growth is also attributed to Cohen Orgad's decision to accept a free electron laser (FEL) from the Weizmann Institute, which an important part of Ariel's research infrastructure and a magnet for outstanding researchers. Ariel's success in meeting the challenge of the new immigration wave soon motivated other colleges of engineering to hire new immigrant scientists. In this manner, Ariel University made a significant national contribution to the absorption of the country's new immigrants.

Social Contribution

The leaders at the helm of Ariel University recognized the benefits of scaling up the institution's operations. They therefore worked tirelessly to increase the accessibility of higher education in practice. Opening up new areas of study and programs, including prestigious applied programs was consistent with the entrepreneurial and marketing spirit of the times, and ensured that the student body would grow. The students who applied to the College were motivated by the College's proximity to the center of the country with good access to transportation arteries (Highway 5), lenient admission requirements, the social-academic environment at the College, availability of dormitories, programs that allowed students to work while they earned a degree, and the reputation of its faculty, which was gained over time. Even early in its history, the College was considered to provide its graduates with good prospects for employment and admission to graduate programs. Students noted the personalized approach and consideration of individual needs, the lenient admission requirements, and the climate at the College as the important advantages over universities (Davidovitch, 2004). The following groups responded to the College's actions to open its gate to meet the growing demand for higher education:

1. Family country of origin - Young people of Mizrahi origin were underrepresented in the student population of the country's universities. The underrepresentation of Mizrahi students (of Asian-African origin) in universities reflected Israel's stratified society. For example, although they accounted for 40% of the 20-24 age group in 1995/6, students of Mizrahi origin accounted for only 26% of all universities students (Swirski & Swirski, 1998). Individuals of Ashkenazi origin accounted for 42.5% of all Jewish university students although they accounted for only 33% of the 20-24 age group in the population.

Since 1995, the education system in Israel has undergone several positive changes. One was the rise in the proportion of individuals eligible for a matriculation certificate, out of all those who sat for matriculation exams. The greatest increase was found in the group of examinees of Asian-African origin, from 61% in 1995 to 74% in 2003 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004). However, because an increase in eligibility was also evident in the group of examinees of European-American origin, from 72% to 83%, the gap between the two groups closed only slightly.

2. Parental educational attainment. A study by Ayalon and Yogev (2002) found a strong correlation between parents' educational attainment and the type of higher education institution attended by their children. For example, the average number of years of education of parents of university students was 14.5, compared to 12.4 years for parents of regional college students and 11.91 for parents of students of teaching colleges. A similar picture was obtained in a comparative study published two years earlier (Frankel, 2000). A student survey conducted by the College found that parents' educational attainment was lower than the educational attainment of parents of university students (Davidovitch, 2004). The difference was more significant at the extreme levels of educational attainment that is, in the percentage of fathers with little education and the percentage of fathers with advanced education. The educational attainment of parents of students at Ariel College was significantly lower than the average for all other colleges. The survey showed that 70% of the fathers of university students and 53% of the fathers of college students had post-secondary education, while only 44% of the fathers of Ariel College students had post-secondary education. These figures are further evidence that the student body at Ariel College represented a specific socioeconomic stratum.

3. The geographic aspect of access to higher education

Although the College was initially classified as a regional college, the College never functioned as a regional college in the narrow sense of this term, due to its location and proximity to the center of the country, 40 kms from Tel Aviv. It is therefore not surprising that since the 1990s, the largest group of students (43%) came from the two adjacent districts – Tel Aviv district and Central district. The College served the populations in the North and South districts to a greater degree compared to the remaining 11 colleges in the Tel Aviv and Central district. For example, in 1999/2000, 12% of all its students came from the North and South districts. Of these 11 colleges, five had a greater proportion of students from the North and South districts, yet three of the five were private law colleges. A fourth was Shenkar College of Engineering and Design, which also offers a unique and high-demand program. Of the seven colleges located in the Tel Aviv and Central districts that had a similar ratio of students from the geographic periphery (the North and South districts), only the Rupic Academic Center had a higher ratio than did the College.

Since one of the declared aims of the higher education reform was to increase the chances of populations in the geographic periphery to gain a post-secondary education, the College met this goal as it was handed down by the CHE. In fact in 2002/2003, 26.3% of all first-year students at the College came from the North and South districts. The implication of this figure is that more than one quarter of all new students came from peripheral areas, which is more than the share of students from geographical proximal areas including Jerusalem district and Judea and Samaria (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

Furthermore, opening the gates of the colleges led to a significant increase in the number of students enrolled in colleges located in the North and South districts. In 2019, app. 24% of all undergraduate students were enrolled in colleges in these districts (9.7% and 14.6%, respectively). Since 2000, the number of students enrolled in colleges in the North district almost tripled. This significant change in the map of higher education in Israel, which occurred in the past two decades, would not have been possible without the diversion of significant government resources to the North and South districts.

4. Socioeconomic clusters. The College demonstrated openness to the needs of socially disadvantaged youngsters. The distribution of the student body by socioeconomic cluster reflects the extent to which the College achieved the reform's intended outcome, which was to open the gates of higher education to those population groups that did not gain access to higher education. Only a negligible proportion of students in Israel compare from the bottom two socioeconomic clusters (1.7% in 1999/2000), and this was also the case at the College (1.6% in 2002/2003). Notably, at the College, the proportion of students from socioeconomic clusters 1-6 exceeded the average in the remaining colleges. According to Central Bureau of Statistics' figures, these students accounted for 47.5% of all students at public colleges in 1999/2000 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002), and at Ariel this figure was 53%. That is to say, over one half of the students at the College came from the population groups that were the beneficiaries of the reform in higher education. These figures show that the College played a role in reducing inequalities between population groups in terms of opportunities for higher education.

The proportion of students at the College from lower socio-economic groups was greater than the proportion at universities and greater than the national average. At the College, students from towns from the two top-ranking socio-economic clusters (9 and 10) accounted for a mere 1.3% of the student body, much lower than their proportion in the public colleges (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002). The major share of College students came from middle-class towns (45.6%) and lower-middle-class towns (43%) — clusters 5-8. Consequently, the College's open-gate policy was significant mainly for students from the middle-lower socioeconomic strata (clusters 5-6).

Changes at the national level

Within a span of four years, the number of students from the lowest socioeconomic clusters (1-4) increased by more than 8,000 students.

According to figures published on the CBS website, between 2016 and 2019, the number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (towns in clusters 1-4) rose by 8,000, and as a result, in 2019, 30% of the country's 50,000 undergraduate students came from towns in these clusters, which included Arab and Haredi towns. Moreover, in 2019, 14,158 and 36,383 students came from towns in clusters 1-2 and 3-4, respectively, compared to 10,335 and 32,670 students, respectively in 2016. These figures show that the sharp rise in the number of students in recent decades was expressed mainly in significant progress in expanding access to

higher education for the population living in the country's peripheral areas and for disadvantaged populations (CBS).

The total number of students of Ethiopian origin increased by 35% in the past years, from 2,937 in 2015 to 3,996 in 2019. In 2019, Ethiopian students accounted for 1.5% of the total number of undergraduate students in Israel. This significant increase is the result of a broad, holistic programs promoted by the CHE and its Budget and Planning Committee in the past three years. The program begins after military service by introducing higher education options in relevant towns, and continues with incentives and tutoring over students' enrollment period, spanning the period from preparatory programs, undergraduate programs, and provides aid and scholarships to outstanding students to continue to graduate and advanced degrees, and also supports post-doctoral fellows and faculty appointments in academic institutions. The Budget and Planning Committee provides institutions with funding for support for these students in the form of academic tutoring, courses in learning skills, funding for housing or travel, and other needs. This broad support system helps prevent attrition and increases these students' chances of success in undergraduate students.

6. Haredi society

The CHE and the Budget and Planning Committee invest significant resources to increase access to higher education for the Haredi sector and promote its integration into the labor market and into Israeli society. These efforts are based on two guiding principles: (a) understanding of the unique features of the Haredi population, specifically with regard to the educational gaps between this group and the general public, as well as educational gaps between women and men; (b) recognition that integrating Haredi citizens into higher education requires respect for their unique lifestyle and consideration of their unique needs. In 2019, over 12,900 Haredi students were enrolled in higher education: 10,850 in undergraduate programs, 1,750 in graduate programs, and 130 in doctoral programs. An additional 2,000 students were enrolled in preparatory programs.

Results of efforts to increase access to higher education were also evident in Arab society. In 2019, the total number of Arab students in higher education exceeded 50,000, after doubling over the past decade. The number of students in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs increased by 95%, 224%, and 118%, respectively over the past decade.

The OECD report published on September 1, 2019 ranked Israel in second place in the world after Canada in the percentage of citizens between the ages of 25 and 64 with post-secondary and academic education (50%), for the second consecutive year (Council for Higher Education, 2019). In 2020, 313,600 students are enrolled in Israel's 61 higher education institutions: 236,450 undergraduate students, 64,180 graduate students, 11,870 doctoral students, and 1,100 students in diploma programs. A review of the change in the number of students over the past decade shows that in the first half of the decade, the rise in the number of students in all programs increased, yet at a slower rate of increase than the previous decade. In the second half of the decade, the number of enrolled students remained stable, and showed a slight decline in 2018, mainly in the number of students enrolled in undergraduate programs. However, in 2019, the number of enrolled students was 308,302, an increase from 283,850 in 2010, and the number of undergraduate students rose by 1,500, reaching 232,365. The next year, the number of undergraduate students increased by 4,100, to 236,450.

On the connection between curricula and social goals

Curricula are an important factor in shaping students' social prospects (van de Wefhorst, 2001). The question arises: To what extent did the College contribute to increasing the range of programs available to students of Mizrahi origin? Research results show that the College created a "window of opportunity" for Mizrahi students. For example, of all first-year students in the architecture program and in business administration and economics, 35.6% and 36.1%, respectively, are of Mizrahi origin. These are two departments that are in high demand. Figures also show that the proportion of Mizrahi students in these two departments at the College was significantly greater than in other universities and colleges. CBS figures and data from other sources indicate that Mizrahi students accounted for only 10.7% of all business administration students in the country's colleges (CBS, 2002, 17, 19), and 26.0% in the country's universities (Ayalon & Yogev, 2002, Table 5.2). This is also the case for architectural studies. Students of Mizrahi origin accounted for only 14.0% of the students in all universities including the Technion, yet 24.0% of the students of architecture in the country's colleges (Ayalon & Yogev, 2002). In other words, the College made an effective contribution in improving the chances of admission of Mizrahi applicants to high-demand departments, where these departments in other institutions had an extremely competitive admission process.

One out of four of all students at Ariel are enrolled in programs in engineering, mathematics and computer science. For the second consecutive year, the number of students in these programs has surpassed social sciences, which was considered the program in highest demand for decades. Within the past decade, the number of computer science students increased by 80%. In 2019, 16,780 students were enrolled in computer science, mathematics, and statistics programs, compared with only 9,122 in 2010. Over the decade, the business administration and law programs, which were in high demand at the beginning of the decade, experienced a decline of 20%-25% in the number of enrollments.

Conclusion

The issue of increasing access to academic undergraduate programs has remained high place on the agenda of the higher education system for over two decades. Undergraduate studies are now considered degree programs for the masses. The system has changed to accommodate the vast number of aspiring students. As a result, those who seek admission into undergraduate programs, will find an institution that makes this possible. Undergraduate degrees, which were once an achievement limited to the elites, are now earned by the masses. The implications of this change have been the topic of innumerable research studies.

Today it appears that this massification is spilling over to more advanced degrees, and figures show that a graduate degree has long since stopped being an intermediate step toward an academic career. The number of graduate students in Israel has tripled over time, and the increase in the number of doctoral students is even greater. These statistics illustrate that the accessibility of higher has also spread to advanced degrees, and the new reality created as a result may have implications for the future of academic research.

Ariel University's contribution is evident at the national level. In the past decade, the country's colleges have firmed established their status in public opinion as legitimate institutions that are and worthy of awarding academic degrees. Colleges' stigma as "second-class" institutions hardly exists today, and the country's colleges have been embraced by the CHE. Facing the basic heterogeneity, the entire higher education system stands united, with uniform tuition practices, offering uniform degrees and faculty employment terms, and all institutions are subject to equal budgeting criteria. The emerging trend is that the academic institutions will compete on quality, the quality of research, of academic teaching, and of resources.

Yigal Cohen Organ, the man who strived to increase access and open the gates of higher education to the masses, also placed Ariel firmly on the road to excellence, leading to a genuine competition among academic institutions, in line with the well-known adage, "As writers vie, wisdom mounts."

Ariel University tore down the gates that restricted access to higher education and it is the single significant academic institution in the past four decades whose students attribute their personal and professional development to its motto and vision, and to whom many other institutions are indebted for their development. After achieving many of its original goals, the College continued to expand its sights and refine its goal to gain university status. To date, Ariel University's development programs are based on the original goals that its founders articulated: to develop a higher education institution that aims to increase students' access to learning in areas needed by the Israeli economy, on the one hand, and to develop research activity, which might also contribute to the development of the country's high-tech industry as well. This development program includes the opening of new departments, development of interdisciplinary programs, expansion of the academic faculty and their research activities, and cultivation of a cadre of research students working toward advanced degrees.

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