

Policy and services for care leavers in higher education institutions in Israel

Interim Report

The aim of this study is to examine how higher education institutions address the needs of vulnerable young persons with a special emphasis on care leavers. Our interest was both in issues of admission and recruiting and in support while in the educational institute. We had several specific questions:

1. Admission policies: Do HEI have a policy to encourage applications by vulnerable youths?
2. Recruitment and Marketing: Are there special marketing efforts directed at this group?
3. Admission criteria: Are there special admission criteria for vulnerable youth
4. Tuition and scholarships: Are there special tuition arrangements and scholarships for this group.

Methods

Sample

The study population consists of 66 higher education institutions certified by the higher education council. Out of them, two have only a Masters' degree program and therefore were not included in the sample. In total, we received answers from 42 higher education institutions (6 universities and 36 colleges). In most cases the respondent was the institution dean of students (66%) or a representative of his/her office or from the departments subordinate to the students' dean (social engagement, student promotion) (22%). In three cases the respondent was a representative of the enrollment office, and in three more cases from the students' union.

Procedure

Research assistants phoned each of the institutions, informing them about the project stating that its purpose was to promote the integration of care leavers in higher education and asked for the contact details of the appropriate person within the institution in order to send him an internet-based structured questionnaire. After sending the computerized questionnaire the research assistants again contacted each institution several times to remind them of the request to fill out the questionnaire. The data presented here is the total data collected between the end of May 2012 through January 2013.

Findings

Admission Policy

We asked the participants whether their institution has a policy promoting the integration of "vulnerable young adults" giving seven categories of populations who fit that description: 16.6% (7) of the institutions stated that they had a policy promoting the integration of each of the populations marked (The central findings are presented in table 1). The majority of the institutions(76%, 32) reported a policy promoting the integration of young adults suffering from financial problems, 66% (28) of the institutions stated having a policy promoting the integration of young adults from difficult familial backgrounds and low parental education, 55% (23) institutions reported having a policy promoting both the integration of immigrants from poor impoverished countries (some of them stated that it was regarding Ethiopian immigrants only), and the integration of minority populations (meaning non-Jewish populations), and 38% (16) stated having a policy promoting the integration of care leavers.

We asked whether the institute has special admission criteria for vulnerable youth, 48% (20) of the institutions stated that they admit vulnerable young adults with psychometric scores lower than the admission score usually required, and 36% (15) of the institutions stated that they accept young adults who haven't completed their high school diploma (the majority of them through an academic prep program). The institutions' representatives further stated additional populations promoted: Five of the institutions have a policy promoting the integration of physically or mentally handicapped young adults, referring specifically to Asperger's syndrome, three of the institutions have a policy promoting the integration of single mothers, three the integration of lone soldiers or young

adults who are alone in the country, two the integration of 30+ adults without a high school diploma or psychometric score, and two other institutions stated a special policy promoting additional minority populations that included: ultra-orthodox Jews, students from the periphery, and women.

In their comments, a few of the respondents stated that the institution's ability to consider applications by populations who didn't meet the threshold's criteria were dependent on the decisions of the higher education council and the limitations set by it. Accordingly, for example, one institution stated being authorized to accept only a limited quota of students whose high school diploma or psychometric exam don't meet the general criteria. In addition, it was stated that on most cases the policy is reflected in special services given to different populations, mainly, financial aid, aid in the completion of a high school diploma through a free prep course, and educational and emotional mentoring.

We asked respondents whether the institution is capable of identifying those students who come from foster or residential care. Only four institutions reported having this ability, although they also indicated that this ability was limited- for example, only to those individuals from youth villages that chose to report that information. Some of the institutions (8) stated that this information could be revealed through the data the students fill in their scholarship application forms. Yet it seems that in most cases this information is used as an indicator for the grant of a scholarship and not saved for the purpose of supplying additional services. In one instance it was stated that sometimes the residential center's staff are the ones referring the youth to higher education, and that their involvement enables the identification of these youth.

Regarding the appraisal of the number of care leavers currently studying in the institution, 15 institutions report that they do not have estimates and another four estimated only having a minor proportion of care leavers. Quantitative estimates ranged from one identifiable student to approximately 50, totaling in an estimate of 224 care leavers currently studying in all 42 HEI surveyed.

Recruitment

Slightly less than half (38%, 16) of the respondents reported their institution having recruitment activities targeted at 'vulnerable youth' as opposed to half that reported not having such operations (six did not respond). Among the recruitment activities mentioned:

exposing the youth to the academia while still in high school (4) through organized visits of the academic institution's representatives in high schools or residential centers, organized visits of the youth in the academic institutions and/or participation in academic lectures. Another way of recruiting is publications through different channels (3) that include publication on the institution's website, in local press or in social networks. In some cases the publication is about specific scholarships for different populations. In addition two institutions stated specific recruitment activities targeted at Ethiopian immigrants that included dedicated scholarships and hiring a recruitment manager. Two respondents reported approaching the youth directly, following their army discharge. Two institutions reported associations with 'Achievements', a private philanthropic organization, as a means for recruitment, the main goal of the organization being the expansion of accessibility of higher education to young adults from the periphery. In addition, one institution representative reported that they turn to vulnerable populations through welfare centers of the social security, 'Enosh'- a non-profit organization for the mentally ill, and the college's website and are working " to reduce the concerns of people with different disabilities of the challenges of higher education and the presentation of the means of support and guidance made available to them". Another institution's representative referred to substantial work being done in increasing the accessibility of the institution for disabled people through the construction of a center for academic accessibility in place and broad cooperation with non-profit organizations in the field.

Admission Criteria

We asked the participants whether they have special procedures or standards of admission enabling young people with problematic academic background (lacking a complete high school diploma or psychometric score- a standard pre-requisite for admission to higher education). A little over half (22) of the institutions reported having such special procedures. About one fourth (12) of the respondents stated that a pre-academic prep program was their way of enabling the admission of young adults failing to meet the threshold criteria and one respondent referred to psychometric prep course being held at the institution. In addition, other standards of admission specifically suited for these populations were reported, including: conditional admission, special cases committees, special affirmative action acceptance proportion in each department (as determined by the Council for Higher Education), study curriculum where the psychometric score is not a pre-

requisite, adding points based on early deprivations provided by project 'worthy of promotion', summer prep courses, and individual interviews. One of the respondents reported a special program for vulnerable young adults in which completion of a high school diploma is the sole pre-requisite with the admission being based upon an in depth interview. Another interesting pathway offered by one of the universities involves the special admission of a quota of 20 Ethiopian immigrants based on a set of tests done by the 'Feurstein Institute', specializing in the diagnosis and academic enhancement of populations with special learning needs. However, one of the respondents commented that in some cases the admission of such students may not be beneficial for them due to the fact that the admission of students falling short of the threshold criteria may expose them to future difficulties meeting the academic requisites of their studies.

Scholarships and Fee Reductions

Almost all respondents (40, 95%) stated that scholarships for vulnerable young adults existed in their institutions. The scholarships ranged between 1000 shekels and a full study scholarship plus a living scholarship, totaling in about 40,000 shekels. In most cases it was stated that the scholarships were given on the basis of socio-economic status and that many of them depended on the completion of a certain amount of hours of voluntary community service and/or participation in leadership programs (ranging from 110 hours to 150 hours a year). Among the scholarships listed are scholarships for immigrants (mainly from Ethiopia), for single parents, for lone soldiers and for care leavers. About a quarter (11) of the institutions stated having specific scholarships for foster and residential care leavers. Two respondents indicated that an applicant stating he is a foster or residential care graduate receives special credits in the overall considerations for granting scholarships, increasing chances of receiving a scholarship. In addition, two scholarships designed specifically for youth villages' and residential centers' graduates were named: 'Rashi-Kazir Fund' (A 10,000 shekel scholarship including participation in a leadership program and 150 hours of voluntary activity) and 'Academy' project which is also a joint project with the 'Rashi-Fund' that accompanies the youth from high school until the graduation of the BA.

Services and Support for Students

The great majority of the participants (95%) reported that their institutions provide financial support to vulnerable youth, 93% provide educational support and 88% provide emotional support. Over three quarters (81%) have all three kinds of support. In many institutions different services were constructed, designed to provide a wide variety of services, for example: support center, students' enhancement services, an aid unit. In some institutions there are a number of representatives whose duty it is to make the services accessible for specific populations like immigrants and minorities.

The participants mentioned a few types of emotional support services: non-formal support is given by mentors, students' dean office staff or the college staff. In some cases the emotional support is part of whole program, and the students must be in constant contact with a program representative. The formal support includes referral to the psychological unit of the institution where one could receive consultations and/or therapy from a psychologist, a social worker, or the institution's consultant- these services are given at a subsidized fee or free of charge. In other cases where no such exist, partial financial funding is given for therapy sessions in the community.

There are many kinds of educational assistance services available in these institutions. Among them are: psychological assessments, exams adjusted for special needs students, special exam dates, help for student with learning disabilities, academic mentoring, extra practice lessons, individual or small group lessons by lectures or advanced students, courses focusing on learning strategies, help in the arrangement of study materials, and subsidized online courses. One institution reported having mentors from the high-tech industry who help the students get familiar with their future occupational environment. In another institution the mentors get supervision in order to give both emotional and learning support.

The financial support is usually offered through scholarships, sometimes requiring volunteering or mentoring others in order to get them. Other kinds of financial mentioned are: assistance in financing private lessons, low rent on students' accommodation, free hot meals, provision of transport expenses and study material, and help with the application for external scholarship. One institution stated that when a student has a special need (for example for dental treatment) they help identify a source for a donation.

Cooperation with external services

About two thirds (27, 64.2%) of the participants mentioned their institutions' work in cooperation with other services in order to address the needs of their students. The most common cooperation are with foundations which donate money for scholarships. In some cases the higher education institution is only a source for information on these funding opportunities. In other cases foundations deposit the money directly in the higher education institution and the institution distributes the money according to the foundations' guidelines. Among the others services the institutions cooperate with are: the administration for immigrant students, local authorities, the national institute of social security, youth centers, the government's program for helping immigrants from Ethiopia, mental health centers, and private donors. In addition, associations working with specific populations such as immigrants' associations and associations for people with physical and learning disabilities. One institution reported cooperating with work places, another one with a website that provides online courses.

One institution's dean referred to a special program concerning the army's 'academic reserve' (a military track designed to prepare new recruits to army careers that require higher education, such as medicine and engineering). Care leavers in this program receive special assistance in finding accommodation in residential centers in the vicinity of the institution. The program enables the youth to get an engineer diploma before entering military service, with extra help while studying.

Referral to external services' assistance

About half (23, 54.8%) of the institutions reported referring the vulnerable students to external services and associations for assistance. The services the institutions refer to are: foundations which provide scholarships, social security which provide help for students who are eligible for rehabilitation, the ministry of health, psychological services and the administration for immigrant students. One participant mentioned referrals done by the institution to 'assisted education'-a joint project of the national institute of social security and the ministry of health, that helps people who suffer from mental illnesses to attend high education institutions by adjustment of the educational program and through intensive support.

Comments and points for discussion

1. A few of the participants rejected the term "vulnerable youth" claiming the term is stigmatic and does not inspire hope in the youth to overcome their situation.
2. Some of the participants claimed that higher education institutions have limited ability to help vulnerable youth. First, they need governmental financing and donations in order to help this population. Second, the council for higher education needs to allow them to accept more students who do not meet the threshold.
3. Three participants expressed their interest in cooperating in the promotion of the integration of care leavers in higher education institutions. These respondents stated they haven't any knowledge of programs targeted for this specific population and would be happy to take part in such programs.
4. It was mentioned that there is a need to expose the youth to high education while still in the care facilities.
5. One participant referred to the difficulty in identifying and contacting care leavers. If this population will be accessible, he claimed, they have the money and the ability to create solutions and special programs to aid them (like a dropping out prevention program).
6. One institution's representative expressed her willingness to help care leavers study for the psychometric exams and completing the matriculation tests in order to enable them to be admitted into higher education institutions. She also offered supplying them with support during their studies.
7. Few participants described special programs they have for specific populations that can be useful for some of the care leavers.
8. One of the participants highlighted the importance of exposing care leavers to the option of learning for an engineering diploma- the advantages of such a program are that the youth don't need matriculation or psychometric exams for admission, and they get a diploma which gives them a profitable and honorable profession.

Table 1: Central findings regarding special policy and actions

Special policy and actions aimed at vulnerable youth	Proportion of institutions holding such positions or services	Comments	
Policy encouraging applications by vulnerable youth	Financial problems	76%	
	Difficult family background and low parental education	66%	Some institutions stated having a special policy regarding other specific populations such as: physically or mentally handicapped, Asperger's syndrome, lone soldiers and single mothers.
	Immigrants from impoverished countries	55%	Some institutions stated targeting specifically immigrants from Ethiopia
	Minority populations	55%	
	Care leavers	38%	
	Youth with psychometric scores not reaching the threshold	48%	
	Youth who haven't completed their high school diploma	36%	
Special recruitment activities aimed at vulnerable youth		38%	Through cooperation with governmental agencies such as the national institute of social security, non profit organizations, and direct contact with the youth on organized visits in residential centers or the academia
Special Admission criteria for vulnerable youth		48%	Special standards of admission used include: special cases committees, affirmative action acceptance proportion, deprivation points, etc.

Services and support	Scholarships for vulnerable youth	95%	Ranging from 1000 to 40,000 NIS, often requiring participation in community service and/or leadership program
	Financial support	95%	Low rents, free meals, transport expenses, provision of study material, aid in application for external scholarships
	Educational support	93%	Exams adjusted for special needs students, academic mentoring, learning strategies courses, arrangement of study materials
	Emotional support	88%	Therapy on campus free of charge, financial funding for therapy sessions in the community
	Cooperation with external resources in the promotion of vulnerable youth	64.2%	Mainly governmental departments and non-profit organizations offering scholarships and assistance for special populations such as immigrants and the physically handicapped
	Referral to external services' assistance	54.8%	