

Inequality in enrollment in higher education among young adults from underprivileged social groups in Israel

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Short Abstract

The worldwide expansion and diversification of higher education systems has sparked growing interest in the stratification of students according to higher education institution and field of study. This paper focuses on Israel, where higher education has experienced significant expansion and diversification during the last two decades. Using descriptive analysis and generalized ordered logistic regression models, the study analyzes vertical and horizontal ethno-religious inequality. Findings indicate that Ashkenazim, the privileged Jewish group, remain the most advantaged regarding enrollment in higher education, but their advantage over other Jewish veteran groups is mainly due to areas of specialization in high school and achievement on the tests that serve as admission criteria to the higher education institutions. Among the enrollees, controlling for high school history reveals that the Jewish disadvantaged groups, Mizrachim and new immigrants, have higher odds than Ashkenazim of enrolling in lucrative programs. Muslim, Druze and Christian Arabs are disadvantaged regarding both the vertical (access) and horizontal (fields of study) dimensions, regardless of high school history and previous achievements.

Extended Abstract

Background

Research has indicated that the expansion of higher education systems has led to a rise in the enrollment rates of economically disadvantaged groups, thus reducing to some extent the vertical dimension of the enrollment gap (i.e. access to higher education). Yet, the expansion has also produced stratification within higher education by granting prominence to the horizontal dimension of inequality (i.e. fields of study or institutions). During the last two decades the Israeli higher education system has undergone a dramatic reform that significantly expanded and diversified the supply of academic opportunities. The study's main research question is whether the reformed tertiary education system provides social mobility paths for underprivileged ethno-religious groups or continues reproducing the existing social hierarchy.

Data and methods

The dataset includes information on a representative sample of 20% of all Israelis born between 1978 and 1982. Members of these cohorts were aged 13-17 years at the time of the 1995 population census, and most of them were sampled in their parents' households. By merging the file of the 1995 census with several additional files, the study follows these cohorts through high school into higher education. The dependent variable focuses on the value of higher education in the labor market. Using information on earnings of bachelor's degree recipients in the early 2000's the different combinations of fields of study and higher education institutions (about 400 combinations) were classified into three categories of expected earnings: low, medium and high. A fourth category includes persons who did not enroll in higher education. The analysis is based on descriptive statistics and generalized ordered logistic regression models.

Main findings

Despite the expansion of the Israeli higher education system in the last two decades, ethno-religious gaps in access to academic degrees have not disappeared. The descriptive analysis indicated that gaps between Ashkenazim and Mizrachim in the vertical dimension still exist today, but these differences disappear when social background and high school experience and achievement are taken into account. In the vertical dimension it was found that Mizrachi and ethnically mixed women are

more inclined than their Ashkenazi counterparts to choose the most lucrative academic programs, while the choices of Jewish men from these groups are similar. In contrast to disadvantaged Jewish groups, Arabs were found to be disadvantaged in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions even after taking into account socioeconomic background, high school history and previous achievements. Members of the Arab minority who chose to enroll in higher education tended to be concentrated in non-lucrative academic programs, oriented towards the public sector. New immigrants from the former Soviet Union enter higher education at lower rates than Ashkenazim, Mizrachim and persons of mixed origin, but they have the highest chances of entering lucrative academic programs.