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The Challenge of the Integration of Religious Communities into the Academy: Improving the Integration of Ultra-Orthodox Students into the Faculty of Social Work

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Integrating members of very religious communities into higher education poses challenges for these populations and for society. Pursuing higher education for those belonging to very religious communities, which typically discourage university attendance due to concerns about its influence, is problematic. Consequently, most are first-generation university students, coming from different cultural and learning contexts that further complicate integration into academia. However, today, the community and the broader society both seek to equip religious populations with professional occupations to enable them to enter the labor market, a move considered economically and socially beneficial.

Professional training is particularly critical for Israel’s ultra-Orthodox population, with about half living below the poverty line. Their scope of employment is limited (approximately 70% of women and 50% of men work, some focusing on Torah study only), and income levels are especially low, as most women work in teaching professions and men in nonprofessional positions.

Recently, the Israeli Council for Higher Education and other bodies have invested heavily in integrating the ultra-Orthodox population into higher education, including providing preparatory programs, study assistance, and tuition fee support. Despite intensive government efforts to expand the number of ultra-Orthodox learning in higher education, the State Comptroller (2018) reported dropout rates among ultra-Orthodox students, male and female, more than double the standard. Furthermore, most ultra-Orthodox aspire to teaching careers, which, while their already established professional niche, offer limited opportunities for entry into occupations the labor market and the ultra-Orthodox community need. Pursuing non-teaching professions may improve their income, their successful integration into the labor market, and their quality of employment (e.g., stability, conditions, work environment, and response to market and community needs). Therefore, examining the higher education experience of ultra-Orthodox students is of paramount importance.

This article analyzes the integration of ultra-Orthodox students into an Israeli university’s social work faculty in separate tracks for women and men from 2018–2020 and compares their dropout rates, academic achievement, and degree of satisfaction with those of non-ultra-Orthodox students.

Preliminary findings indicate differences in dropout rates and academic achievement between ultra-Orthodox men and women, with women integrating better than men; nonetheless, both genders express high levels of satisfaction with the courses. The comparative findings show that while ultra-Orthodox students express greater satisfaction with their experience, despite their slightly lower achievement levels compared to other students. Additional information received from lecturers in the tracks for ultra-Orthodox men and women (n = 36) through a structured quantitative questionnaire in 2019 indicates how lecturers organized teaching for these tracks.

Analyzing these aspects of the ultra-Orthodox student experience will help identify strategies for expanding their participation and enhancing the specific support needed to help them remain enrolled, improve their academic achievement, and successfully integrate into vital professions. The insights from the study will assist the university’s academic staff and administration in developing customized teaching and learning methods and support services and will contribute to the formulation of more effective public policies to ensure empowerment and successful integration of these students into higher education and the labor market.