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

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Integrating members of highly religious communities into higher education is challenging for the populations and society. Pursuing higher education for those who belong to very religious communities is complex because most are first-generation university students, since the community typically discourages its members from attending university, and they come from different cultural contexts. The community and general society, however, share a desire to bring religious populations into the labor market with professional occupations, which is considered economically and socially beneficial.

This issue is particularly critical among Israel’s Ultra-Orthodox population. About half this population lives below the poverty line, the scope of employment is limited (approximately 70% of women and 50% of men work, in some cases as a result of Torah study), and income levels are especially low, as most women work in teaching professions, and men are employed in nonprofessional jobs.

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, assistance with studies, and help with tuition fees. Despite intensive government efforts to expand the number of Ultra-Orthodox learners in higher education, the State Comptroller (2018) reports dropout rates that are more than double the standard rate. Furthermore, most aspire to teaching careers; not only is this their established niche but it also offers limited opportunity for entry into occupations required by the labor market and the ultra-Orthodox community. Pursuing professions other than teaching may also enhance income and the quality of employment (e.g., stability, conditions, work environment, and response to market and community needs). Thus, it is important to examine the higher education experience of Ultra-Orthodox students.

This article analyzes the 2018–2020 integration of Ultra-Orthodox students into a Faculty of Social Work at an Israeli university, in separate tracks for women and men and compares their dropout rates, academic achievement, and degree of satisfaction with those of non-Ultra-Orthodox students.

Preliminary findings indicate differences between Ultra-Orthodox men and women in dropout rates and academic achievement. Ultra-Orthodox women integrate better than ultra-Orthodox men, while both genders express high levels of satisfaction with the courses. The comparison shows that the level of achievement of Ultra-Orthodox students is slightly lower than that of other students, but the Ultra-Orthodox students express greater satisfaction.

Additional information received from lecturers in the tracks for Ultra-Orthodox men and women (n = 36) through a structured quantitative questionnaire indicates how lecturers organized teaching in these tracks.

Analyzing these aspects of the Ultra-Orthodox student experience will help identify strategies for expansion and the specific support needed to help students from this community stay enrolled, improve their academic achievement, and successfully integrate into vital professions. The insights from the study will assist the university academic staff and administration in identifying tailored teaching and learning strategies and support services and contribute to the formulation of more effective public policies to ensure empowerment and successful integration of these students into higher education and the future labor market.