

RESEARCH PAPER

The choice of a higher education institution: A preliminary investigation of the considerations of Jewish and Arab teachers studying for a master degree in education

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This paper aimed to explore the factors influencing Jewish and Arab teachers in Israel when choosing a higher education institution (HEI) for their master's degree studies. Participating teachers (n=138), all students in master's degree programmes in education, were asked about their considerations when choosing their HEI, according to two groups of factors: the HEI's reputation and the convenience of the HEI. They were also asked to evaluate their programme's academic standard and level of support. The results indicated that these students chose their HEI primarily for convenience factors and less for the HEI's reputation. They positively evaluated the courses' academic standard but did not feel that the HEIs were very supportive. Both Jewish and Arab students felt that the HEI's reputation was less important than convenience considerations; yet, for Arab students, the elite of their society, the reputation and quality are considered to be almost equally important as convenience considerations. We conclude that despite the significant trend of 'massification' of the HEIs, HEIs should do their best to maintain their reputation as well their convenience to attract students from minority groups. Further research on the issue is recommended to confirm this study's conclusions.

Keywords: postgraduate studies; choice; motivation; minority

Introduction

In the past, in most countries, higher education was considered a responsibility of the state and was understood as serving the 'public good'. University study would benefit the individual, but also society, since it improved productivity. The academic enterprise was relatively small, and thus not too expensive, since it only admitted a small and elite segment of population (Altbach, 2010; Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010; Reay et al., 2005; Volansky, 2012). Over the last decade, major shifts have occurred in the size, needs, aspirations, and expectations of student populations across the globe including Israel. Efforts to respond to current student realities have resulted in a wide range of adjustments in the structure and operation of higher education institutions (HEI) and the programmes that they offer. These developments, in turn, have affected the students' experiences of higher education, presenting them with a new particular set of challenges and opportunities (Altbach, 2011; Arar et al., 2014; Brooks & Waters, 2011).

Like many other modern states, Israel is characterised by plenitude of competing possibilities for academic study and so HEIs compete one with the other and invest significant efforts to attract potential students (Ayalon & Yogev, 2005). To cope with massification,

HEIs should ideally ensure optimal adaptation to students' needs using student-centred approaches and continually updating teaching methods to meet life-long learning needs of professionals. Yet massification of higher education may also be achieved as a trade-off, when in order to accommodate larger sections of the population, entry requirements are lowered and inexperienced additional staff are employed and this may lead to lowering of academic standards and injure academic quality (Altbach, 2011; Volansky 2012).

Researchers have tried to understand the interplay between students' needs and the development of higher education over the last decade. Altbach and his colleagues (2010) identified three basic trends in higher education development worldwide: elitism, massification (i.e. the move from a system that served only a small elite to one that every member of society might aspire to experience), and universal access. Almost all countries have dramatically increased their higher education participation rates (Hemsley-Brown, 2012). Although improved access to higher education may be achieved by lowering academic standards, it enlarges the population with academic qualifications and therefore increases potential for social mobility, especially in underprivileged populations (Arar et al, 2014; Brooks & Waters, 2011).

Globalization also influences the appearance of higher education as the global economy requires highly trained professionals to work in an international context (Altbach et al., 2010). Global knowledge and research systems that are disseminated through sophisticated information technology play a key role in shaping the development of higher education (Haj-Yehia & Arar, 2014). Another trend is that new patterns of funding are evolving to support mass participation in higher education and the higher education systems in most countries are becoming increasingly diversified (Altbach, 2007). Financial pressure resulting from massification, combined with the influence of neoliberal international funding agencies during the last decade, have tempered the notion of higher education as strictly a public good (Unterhalter, 2010). Thus, most countries have also seen the rise of a private higher education sector that is absorbing some of the new demand (Altbach, 2007). Indeed, private institutions enrol a majority of students in a growing number of countries. The challenge is to ensure that the private higher education sector, both non-profit and the newer for-profit institutions serve the national interest and provide high quality education (Altbach et al., 2010).

Until recently, most Israeli HEIs were public and the pursuit of higher education was mostly reserved for elite levels of the society (Haj-Yehia & Arar, 2014). As there were few HEIs, the demand for higher education exceeded supply. Fierce competition for the limited places available for study meant that only those who excelled academically (which usually corresponded with socio-demographic privilege) could meet the HEIs' entry requirements (Arar et al., 2014). HEIs thus maintained a very high academic reputation. Yet the trend towards privatization in higher education, internationalism and globalization has substantially altered this profile (Altbach et al., 2010). Many new HEIs have opened, most in peripheral areas of Israel (Ayalon, 2008). Additionally, many Arab students, especially those seeking second and third academic degrees search for and find attractive opportunities to study in other countries in Europe and North America, and also in neighbouring Arab countries such as Jordan (Arar & Mustafa, 2011).

There has been very little investigation concerning the motivations of students when choosing a HEI for their further studies and this is especially true regarding the motivations of Israeli students (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2013). Recent reforms in Israel's education system have increased the importance of a teacher's further academic education and a master's degree in education is now required when teachers aspire for promotion to managerial, leadership and consultation positions in schools (Volansky, 2012).

Given these circumstances, this study aimed to discuss factors that influence students' choice of a HEI. More specifically, it addressed the following research questions: (1) what are the considerations that students weigh when choosing a HEI for a master's degree in education in Israel? (2) How do students perceive their HEI during their studies? And (3) do Jewish students and Arab students have different considerations when making this choice?

The article begins with a review of the literature concerning students' choice of HEI, presenting the various motivations that influence students' perceptions towards their places of study. The research context is then described, followed by the research method and research procedure. Following the description of the research findings, conclusions are drawn indicating implications for policy concerning the planning of higher education for teachers as professionals in mid-career, a group which constituted the population studied in the present research.

Theoretical background

Students' choice of higher education institutions

Many scholars indicate that it is important to understand how students choose the institution for their higher education (Altbach, 2011; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2013; Reay et al., 2005). The rationale given for such research is the increasing demand for higher education in many fields of work as well as the need to enrich national economic power and development (Workman, 2011). A country interested in developing its human resources would benefit from improvement of educational policy and practice at all levels in line with evidence concerning students' considerations when deciding where to study (Altbach et al., 2010). Insufficient government funding of HEIs forces those institutions to think of ways to attract students and to be more inventive in marketing new study programmes, especially, special programmes that will appeal to the students but also be profitable for the institution's financial situation (Altbach, 2011; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2012).

The research literature identifies several considerations that may influence students' choice of a HEI (Reay et al., 2005). Brooks and Waters, (2011) for example, noted considerations relating to the prospect of attaining employment during studies and possibilities for a smooth transition from university into work after graduation and they suggest that the consideration of the HEI's geographical location often supersedes other considerations. Other considerations for the choice of HEI noted in the literature include the proximity of the HEI to a student's place of residence, flexible entrance standards and flexible study requirements (Workman, 2011; Brooks & Water, 2011), students' desire to 'distinguish themselves' from other graduates: the university's status (Reay et al., 2005) and engaging in a range of career relevant studies. Workman (2011) argued that the most important consideration when seeking where to study is the institution's reputation. The HEI's reputation was also the highest ranked factor for choosing a university, according to a study carried out in the UK (Briggs, 2006). Another study indicated that students should consider

HEIs according to their academic quality, what they teach, their reputation, image, orientation of the studies and financial resources and other differences (Hemsley-Brown, 2012). A systematic review of the literature on students' HEI choices tried to map all noted considerations for choosing a HEI. These included: the institution's climate, type of institution, administrative efficiency, career prospects, experiential and lifestyle benefits, overall expected experience, post-degree employability, social benefits, the physical conditions, quality of staff, entrance standards, academic ranking, teaching quality, family and friends' influence and recommendations where to study, part-time employment prospects, proximity to home and financial considerations. The review categorised those considerations by outcome and benefits, characteristics of the institutions and quality (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2013). In contrast to the studies reviewed, that related primarily to the choice of HEI for first degree studies, the present research focused on students studying for master's degrees in education.

Given the above-mentioned considerations drawn from the literature, our study suggested a simplified categorisation of the factors influencing choice of a HEI for postgraduate studies. We grouped all the factors together into two categories:

- 1) The institution's reputation and academic standard factors - including considerations such as the academic standard of the HEI, recommendations by work place, friends and family, the quality of the institution's academic staff and post degree employability.
- 2) Convenience factors - including considerations such as the institution's geographical proximity, flexibility of entrance requirements and academic demands during study.

Students' perceptions of higher education institutions

Other issues connected to the motives for HEI choice relate to students' satisfaction regarding the HEI and students' evaluation of their academic programmes during their studies. Students' satisfaction and perceptions of their courses may affect their wellbeing, their perseverance to complete their study programme and even their future career (Gibbs & Costley, 2012). One source of students' satisfaction is the HEI's quality assurance (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010). Unterhalter (2010) listed several dimensions that should be investigated to measure the quality of study programmes:

- 1) Tangibles: physical facilities of the HEI, such as equipment, support services and service personnel
- 2) Reliability: the degree to which the knowledge, skill learned and services are accurate and dependable.
- 3) Responsiveness: the extent of willingness to help students as consumers and meet their needs and wants.
- 4) Assurance: the confidence and trust that consumers hold towards the HEI.
- 5) Empathy: the attention that the HEI offers to students.

As students are both consumers and products of the HEI, they must evaluate the academic quality, relevance of the programme, and course content, throughout their studies, considering the programme's compatibility to their needs and demands (Belhaj, Ben Ayed & Kammoun, 2013). Relying on the above-mentioned literature, we investigated two groups of

factors that might influence the students' perceptions of the HEI and satisfaction from the programme as follows:

- 1) The academic quality standard of the HEI – the level of intellectual stimulation and interest, usefulness of the studying facilities and aids, possibilities for promotion for high achievements, contribution to future high-level employment positions.
- 2) The responsiveness and empathy of the HEI towards students – including fairness in measurement and evaluation, help and support of the administrative staff as well as the academic faculty of the HEI and whether there is a supporting environment.

Research context

Understandably, there are many types of student populations distinguished by student characteristics such as age, socio-economic status, gender or ethnic origin. Thus, factors that influence the decisions of one group may be irrelevant to another group when choosing a HEI. Israel is characterised by large socio-economic gaps between different sectors of the population, so that weaker sectors suffer from social inequality, under-employment, and poverty (Yashiv, 2012). Israel's Arab minority is one of these weaker sectors. On-going interest and discussion within Israel relates to worrying economic problems.

As our sample includes a considerable number of Israeli Arab students, our investigation focused on the influence of ethnic origin and tried to ascertain whether the two different student populations, Jewish and Arab students, had different considerations when choosing a HEI for second-degree studies. Arab citizens of Israel are Israel's largest minority group, constituting 20 per cent of Israel's more than eight million citizens (Gharrah, 2013). The Arab minority differs ethnically, culturally and linguistically from the majority Jewish population in Israel. They mostly live in separate settlements in peripheral areas although there are a few mixed Jewish-Arab cities. A report (published by the Tel Aviv University, Department of Public Policy) on the status of employment within the Arab sector in Israel (Yashiv & Kasir, 2013) reveals a problematic situation of underemployment within this sector. Although 18 per cent of Israel's Arab citizens are of working age, only 13.1 per cent are actually employed in profitable work (Gharrah, 2013). This is due especially to the underrepresentation of Arab women in the labour market and Arab men's comparatively early retirement age.

The Arab school system is completely separate from the Jewish education system and education is conducted in Arabic (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013). Arab settlements receive less funding for infrastructure and social services than Jewish settlements. This detrimentally affects the quality of the Arab schools (Abu-Saad, 2006). According to data published in the Israeli press (Ben-David, 2014), almost 16 per cent of Arab children drop out from their studies at the age of 14 in comparison to 5 per cent of Jewish children. Only 65 per cent of Arab children finish high school in comparison to almost 95 per cent of Jewish children. Only 23 per cent of Arab children in comparison to 47 per cent of Jewish children succeed in attaining matriculation grades high enough to comply with university entrance requirements. The obstacles facing candidates for higher education in Israel have much greater impact upon the Arab population especially because of the disadvantaged status of education in most Arab schools and the fact that Hebrew and English are the languages of instruction in HEIs. Thus, Arabs constitute only 12 per cent of all students in Israeli HEI, only 9 per cent of students

who gain a first degree, only 8 per cent of those who go on to master's degrees and only 4 per cent of doctoral students. Only two per cent of the academic staff are Arabs (Ben-David, 2014; Haj-Yehia & Arar, 2014).

It is reasonable to assume that our sample group of Arab students studying for master's degrees is an elite group within the Arab population, enjoying a relatively high socio-economic level, with very high motivation and ambitions and it might have unique considerations regarding HEI choice and perceptions regarding their studies, which may differ from those of the Jewish students' group. This study aims to examine this assumption.

We therefore posed the following research questions: (1) what are the considerations that students weigh when choosing a HEI for a master's degree in education in Israel? (2) How do students perceive their HEI during their studies? And (3) do Jewish students and Arab students have different considerations when making this choice?

Methods

The sample

Because this study is a preliminary, explorative study, we settled on a convenience sample of teachers studying in master's degree programmes in education, in four old established multicultural universities in Israel (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The University of Tel Aviv, The University of Haifa and the University of Beer Sheva). Access to additional universities and other kinds of HEIs around Israel required more extensive resources, beyond our possibilities. We understand that because of the nature of our sample, it may not be possible to generalise the study's results to the whole population of students in Israel, not even to the whole population of master's degree students in education. We intend to study this issue further with a more representative sample in the near future. Nevertheless, despite the limitation of the present sample, it may teach us much about students' choices and perceptions and thus provide urgently needed information for HE policy makers in Israel who are required to respond to the rapidly changing trends in HEI. The students who continue for a master's degree in education are mainly teachers who want to improve their educational practice in schools or to advance to leadership positions in their school or administrative and supervisory roles in the Ministry of Education. The vast majority of these students are women.

It is also notable that there is a higher percentage of Arab students in master's degree education programmes in comparison to other academic disciplines. Arab students constitute 8 per cent of all master's degree students but 11.6 per cent of master's degree students in education at Israeli universities. (CBS, 2013). There is a general trend of increase in the numbers of students studying for a master's degree in education at colleges rather than at universities. This trend is especially noticeable in the Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish populations (Press announcement, Israeli CBS 2013).

The survey was administered in the academic year 2011/2012. Participation criteria in our study included participation on the day of the survey at randomly picked classes at the four old established universities in Israel which offer master's degree programmes in educational management. Students were invited to fill in the study questionnaire. 90 per cent of those present in the selected classes agreed to participate and completed the questionnaires and thus our sample consisted of 138 students. Selected demographic characteristics of the sample participants as reported in the questionnaires are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of Arab and Jewish students in the sample

Demographic characteristic	Jews (n=110)	Arab (n=28)	Total (n=138)
Percentage of women	89	80	87
Percentage of students over 45	15	10	14
Percentage with family income over NIS 15,000	22	20	22
Percentage of married students	58	70	61

According to the data shown in Table 1, there were far more females than male students in our sample, which is a typical ratio of female to male among master's degree students in education. Thus too, the data relating to the students' socio-economic level is typical for master's degree students as 20-22 per cent of them reported a monthly family income above NIS15, 000, which is considered above average family income in Israel in the Jewish sector and very high family income in the Arab sector. In comparison to the Jewish students, among the Arab students there is a lower proportion of women to men, lower proportion of students over 45 and higher proportion of married students. In consideration of the fact that a large proportion of the Arab citizens of Israel have incomes below the poverty line, the comparison of socio-demographic characteristics seems to indicate that at least some of the Arab students represent an elite group within their society.

As noted above, the proportion of Arab students studying for a master's degree in education at universities is 11.6 per cent (CBS, 2013). The relative over-representation of Arab students in the sample is due to the researchers' access to classes with many Arab students.

Research ethics

We did our best to follow ethical research codes. The selected HEIs gave their consent to the researchers to conduct the survey. The use of students' questionnaire data was deemed exempt from the full IRB review committees and authorities. It was assumed that the respondents, as intelligent adults were capable of giving their informed consent. To ensure voluntary participation and ethical conduct, an introductory letter was enclosed with the questionnaire explaining the purpose of the research and promising that the data would be used for research purposes only, assuring the students that they were free to refuse to participate in the research and promising that their anonymity would be strictly maintained.

The research tool

The research tool was a survey questionnaire, specially designed for this study. The items developed were based on the reviewed relevant literature (Ayalon and Yogev, 2005; Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2010). To check clarity and relevance of the items, the questionnaire was piloted among 23 postgraduate students. Following the pilot study, minor editing corrections were made in the questionnaire. Construct validity was tested for each measure by a factor analysis. The different sub-parts of the questionnaire were tested for reliability, which was found to be satisfactory.

The questionnaire included three parts:

- 1) Respondents' personal background: gender, age and income.
- 2) Respondents' level of agreement of items on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = 'I completely disagree' to 5 = 'I completely agree'. This part consisted of 11 statements relating to considerations for choice of a HEI. We performed a factor analysis, which revealed a solution of two factors which justified our initial construct of two categories of considerations. This provided the foundation for the two variables for choice of a HEI:
 - a. The HEI's reputation: considerations relating to the institution's reputation and academic quality, including statements regarding the reputation and academic quality of their university. This sub section of the questionnaire included 7 items with satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = 0.82$) The items were statements relating to recommendations by work places concerning this HEI, friends' recommendations, the institution's reputation, its quality, the provision of further employment possibilities, applicability of the study programme and use of a student-centred approach.
 - b. The HEI's convenience. Items relating to convenience considerations, including statements on what leads students to choose the particular institution: geographical proximity, possibilities of working while studying, one day a week programme and relevance of the chosen programme to chosen occupation. This sub-section included four items and its reliability was only 0.50.
- 3) Respondents' rankings of level of agreement with 13 additional closed-ended statements on a similar five-point Likert scale. The original questionnaire contained 16 items in this section but after a reliability analysis, three items were removed. The remaining statements related to students' attitudes and opinions on two aspects of their studies:
 - a. The quality of academic standard. This sub-section containing 8 items was found to have high reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$). The items related to: how interesting the courses were for the students, its contribution to their academic development, the contribution for future employment, the contribution to high achievements and a variety in methods used to evaluate their academic achievements.
 - b. Responsiveness and empathy toward students. This sub-section included 5 items which were found to have satisfactory reliability. The items related to supportiveness of the staff, evaluation and measurement of fairness, supportive class environment, responsiveness to students' needs and requests. This sub-section was found to have satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$).

Data analysis

Descriptive and inferential data analysis was undertaken using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences - Version 17.0, SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.). Descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations, were used to summarise the questionnaire data. To calculate the considerations and perceptions a mean and standard deviation was calculated for each group of students and for each factor as well as for all students. Inferential statistics (t-tests) were used to compare the differences between the students from the two different kinds of HEI as well as between the two ethnic groups (Arabs

and Jews). All tests were two-tailed unless otherwise stated, with the results considered statistically significant if the p value was < 0.05.

Results

What is more important for students when choosing their HEI: Convenience considerations or the HEI's good reputation?

Table 2 Means and standard deviations of consideration factors for choosing HEI (n=138)

The consideration factor	M	SD
Reputation	3.10	0.87
Convenience	3.46	0.84

The questionnaire regarding choice of HEI contained 11 items on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. Based on the factor analysis carried out on this section, we defined the two variables: 'Reputation' and 'Convenience' as followed:

- 1) The HEI's reputation based on the average grading (from 1 to 5) of the 7 items relating to: recommendations by work places concerning this HEI, friends' recommendations, the institution's reputation, its quality, the provision of further employment possibilities, applicability of the study programme and student centred approach.
- 2) The HEI's convenience based on the average of the following 4 items: geographical proximity, possibilities of working while studying, one day a week programme and relevance to chosen occupation.

As can be seen from the mean scores for consideration factors (Table 2), the mean for the 'convenience' factor was higher than the mean for the 'reputation' factor, meaning that convenience considerations are more important to the students than the institution's reputation, when choosing a HEI.

How do the students perceive their HEI during their studies?

Table 3 Means and standard deviations for students' perceptions regarding aspects of their HEI during their studies (n=138)

Perceived aspect	M	SD
Academic standard ⁽¹⁾	3.59	0.76
Responsiveness ⁽²⁾	3.35	0.80

- 1) The academic standard factor is an average grading of 8 items the extent to which they found the courses interesting, its contribution to their academic development, the contribution for future employment, the contribution to high achievements and variety in evaluation methods used to evaluate their achievements
- 2) The responsiveness factor contains 5 items: the supportiveness of the staff, evaluation and measurement of fairness, supportive class environment, responsiveness to students' needs and requests.

As can be seen in Table 3 above, the students had positive perceptions of both studied aspects of their HEI. The overall mean for perceptions of the aspect of 'academic standard' is higher than the mean for perceptions of the institutions' 'responsiveness' that is to say that although

the students evaluate the help and support of the university staff as above average, they gave higher ratings for the academic contribution of the courses and faculty .

Does ethnic origin influence the considerations that students take into account when choosing a HEI for master's degree studies, in a comparison between minority Arab and majority Jewish citizens of Israel?

Table 4 Means and standard deviations of students' consideration factors according to the different ethnical groups

Consideration Factor	Arabs (n=28)	Jews (n=110)
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Reputation	3.23 (0.81)	3.07 (0.88)
Convenience	3.43 (0.80)	3.47 (0.85)

The results shown in Table 4 above indicate that for both ethnic groups, the more important consideration when choosing a HEI is the consideration of convenience in comparison to the institution's reputation. Yet Arab students tended, more than did Jewish students to rely on the institution's reputation when choosing a HEI. This difference was not found to be significant (in a t-test between the two sectors). A notable difference between Arabs and Jews was the gap between the average grades given for the two types of considerations: reputation and convenience. This gap is more noticeable within the Jewish population who graded their convenience considerations as much more important than their reputation considerations, whereas the Arab students gave a rather similar grading for level of importance for both reputation and convenience factors when choosing where to study.

Discussion

Understanding the considerations, which students take into account in choosing a HEI is important for several reasons. Mainly, it can provide informative feedback for the administrative level of a HEI in order to conduct formative evaluations. This was our rationale, as educational management researchers, to carry out this research. We believe that the results of such a study will contribute to HEIs managements so that they can learn how to improve their service and address students' needs. Directly questioning the students themselves helped us to understand their thinking processes, expressed in what they said about their studies and how they made their choice when deciding where to study.

In order to understand the importance of different considerations weighed by the students when choosing a HEI and their perceptions of the HEI during their studies, it is useful to look at their demographic characteristics and socio-economic situation. Overall, the socio-demographic characteristics of the students in our sample typify the whole population

of students in the different HEIs in Israel. This is true for Arab students as well as for the Jewish students, although the sample may not be sampled as statistically required. The only exception is that the Arab students are overrepresented.

According to our results, the considerations weighed by these Israeli students to choose a HEI contrast with considerations noted in previous findings in the literature for master's degree students' choice of HEI. According to this literature, consideration of the institution's reputation is generally more important for the student's choice than convenience considerations (Arar et al., 2014; Shavit, Arum & Gamoran, 2007), while our results indicate that convenience considerations are more important for the students. A possible explanation for this difference is the special characteristics of the group of students examined in our study, namely mainly female students, in mid-career stage or even approaching the end of their career (Heyler, 2011; Workman, 2011). These students obviously aspire to study in order to advance their career. Graduating with a master's degree may enable them to attain more responsible, managerial positions within their schools (Ben-David, 2014). Yet, considerations such as the need to work while studying (Flint, 2011; Reay et al., 2005), or geographical proximity (Brooks and Waters, 2011), studying for only 1-2 days a week, and other matters of convenience, appear to be their prime concerns, superseding considerations relating to the institution's reputation (Belhaj et al., 2013; Gibbs & Costley, 2012). Giving greater weight to the reputation of the HEI would come at a price of less convenient circumstances, such as traveling further from home and probably not being able to work while studying (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Flint, 2011). Such a price may be worthwhile for young students at the beginning of their professional life but not for mature students.

The demographic characteristics of the master's degree students in education that constituted our sample may also explain their positive opinion regarding the academic standard at their institutions as well as their relative criticism of insufficient responsiveness to their needs as working, not too young people (Flint, 2011; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2013; Workman, 2011). Our study also considered the fact that there were possible difficulties for the ethnic minority group of Arab Israelis to gain access to HEI due to socio-economic inequality. The question we asked was whether Arab students who are studying toward a master's degree after overcoming various obstacles to get into a HEI have different considerations when choosing a HEI than the majority Jewish students who are faced with lesser difficulties relating to access. The results indicate that the preference for convenience considerations over the institution's reputation is more prominent among Jewish students than among Arab students (see: Belhaj et al., 2013; Reay et al., 2005). Jewish students are almost indifferent to considerations relating to the institution's reputation whereas Arab students consider it as almost important as convenience considerations (Arar et al., 2014).

One of the explanations for these differences between Jewish and Arab students can be found in their demographic characteristics. The Arab students were slightly younger and with a higher ratio of men to women and we conclude that these characteristics distinguish them as a special group which attributes relatively more importance to the reputation of their institution and less importance to convenience factors as found by Belhaj et al. (2013) in a student population in Tunisia. It was assumed that Arabs, who are able to study at universities in Hebrew, at a distance from their settlements, belong to a more ambitious elite group of their society (Altbach, 2007) and indeed 20 per cent of these students reported incomes that are considered exceptionally high in Arab society in Israel. Ambitious elite students obviously

attribute greater importance to the reputation of the higher education institution than other students (Haj-Yehia & Arar, 2014).

This study is a new and an initial attempt to learn about the students' point of view in the context of a new situation in the Israeli higher education arena, increased numbers of master's degree students in HEIs. Its special contribution is the opportunity to focus on the viewpoints of teachers who have invested special efforts to study for a master's degree, in response to two new education reforms in Israel (Volansky, 2012). These teachers want to use their specific knowledge and accumulated experience in teaching in order to advance their careers (Gibbs & Costley, 2012). They choose academic programmes in order to improve their chances for promotion to higher positions within their schools or to gain a better position such as educational counselling, work in special education or educational management elsewhere. This study also provided an opportunity to learn more about the growing sector of Arab Israeli students studying for master's degrees.

Very few studies have looked at the issue of choice of HEI for master's degree studies and this was another reason for the present study. As noted, this study presents results of a very preliminary investigation. Since a convenience sample was used, the generalisation of this study's findings to all master's degree students is limited. The limited sample size is also a potential bias but one should remember that the overall numbers of Israeli students are limited, especially the numbers of Arab students, citizens of Israel.

Recommendations

The trends shown concerning postgraduate students' considerations when choosing a HEI differ from previous results concerning this issue (Arar et al., 2014). To establish our findings we recommend the performance of further empirical studies looking deeply into these issues, with more representative samples at universities, new academic colleges and teacher training colleges with master's degree programmes in education. We also recommend that future research should investigate the motivations for choice of HEIs on a national level, comparing the motivations of students from different populations.

Based on the results of this study, we also recommend that Israel's HEI should become more open and accessible to older and mid-career students, and especially to Arab students, who have special difficulties noted in this and previous studies (Haj-Yehia & Arar, 2014). Relying on the findings of the present study, their special needs as the elite of their society to look for high quality academic programmes should not be overlooked. We suggest building special mentoring programmes within Israeli universities to assist Arab post-graduate students such as the already existing programmes for Arab undergraduate students. A good example of such programmes is the 'Kahanoff Arab Student Retention Initiative' for first year Arab students (Tel Aviv University Review, 2014, 2, p. 29). We also call for new study programmes for master's degree or a programme for a doctor's degree in education (Ed.D.) in the universities as well as in colleges (Latta and Wunder, 2012) that would provide special accommodation for teachers in mid-career, who wish to combine research with practice and lead change in the education field. HEIs should do their best to maintain their reputation as well their convenience to attract students from minority groups.

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