

Abstract

Countries characterized as multicultural face challenges deriving from the demographic growth of various groups of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity and social difference. These countries cope with social and economic gaps resulting from this growth (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Keenan, 2015; St Amour, 2020). In that respect, access to high quality education is a major policy tool, since learning provides tools and develops skills and qualifications that enable mobility (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). Moreover, access to higher education contributes to the development not only of the individual, but also to that of the economy and society (Börjesson & Cea, 2020; Park & Kim, 2020; World Bank Publications, 2021; Yuan & Powell, 2013).

Israel is no different, as its society is comprised of a mosaic of cultures. It is widely multicultural (Tamir, 2015) and its population includes a diversity of ethno-cultural groups distinguished by their demographic, economic, cultural, social and religious characteristics (Kliner-Kasir, 2020; Nachtom, 2009). Moreover, like other multicultural countries, it copes with the challenge of the demographic growth of the ethno-cultural groups comprising its population, such as the ultra-Orthodox society, which is at the focus of this study (Malach & Kohener, 2020).

The integration of diverse groups in higher education institutions poses a significant challenge. On the one hand, it requires learning tracks adapted to the different needs and characteristics of the students and the demands of the work market. On the other hand, there is the need to maintain the core principles of higher education, such as pluralism and equality (Mtawa & Nkhoma, 2020; Remenick, 2019). In spite of the challenge, given the importance of higher education, different countries have set up policies encouraging students from diverse groups to integrate and acquire higher education. In the United States, for example, tribal colleges and universities (TCU) have been constructed for the Native American population, considered as one of the most weakened populations (Austin, 2013), and characterized by demographic growth, large families, low employment and income rates, poverty and high high-school dropout rates as compared to the general population (Austin, 2013; Redbird, 2020; Willetto & Goodluck, 2004). These universities and colleges provide the Native American communities better access to higher education by means of personal accompaniment, and academic and economic aid. In addition, their learning programs integrate the language, culture and tradition of the students joining them (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2012; National Academies of Sciences et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2020).

The literature dealing with the topic of integration of students from diverse ethno-cultural populations into higher education institutions emphasizes the importance of studying in these institutions, and

leans, usually, on the theory of human capital development (Moreno-López et al., 2022). According to this theory, investment in learning, through development and improvement of individuals' skills, qualifications and knowledge, contributes to improve individuals' personal and social welfare by means of improving productivity and creating opportunities for higher income. In addition, it contributes to the market by increasing the rate of the economic growth (Adedeji & Campbell, 2013; Bar-Haim et al., 2019; Boni & Walker, 2016; Deming, 2022; Kessy, 2020; Mietule, 2012; Moreno-López et al., 2022).

Studies analyze the integration of students from diverse populations into higher education institutions from two perspectives. From the first perspective, at the macro level, studies analyze the role and contribution of higher education to the market, and indicate that the development of high quality human capital contributes to improve the rate of economic growth (Adedeji & Campbell, 2013; Klemencic et al., 2020), and to reduce poverty (Bar-Haim et al., 2019; Cohen & Soto, 2007). From the second perspective, at the micro, or individual level, studies indicate that the educated have better employment opportunities, higher wages and better ability to save and invest (Bloom et al., 2014; Malchi, 2016b; World Bank Publications, 2021).

Notably, most studies examining the issue of integration of students from diverse groups into higher education institutions choose to focus on the development of human capital theory, at the macro and micro levels. However, research dealing with integration policy analysis and focusing on diverse populations is scarce. Therefore, the contribution of the current study lies in that it analyzes the policy of integration of ultra-Orthodox society into higher education.

Focusing on the integration of ultra-Orthodox society in higher education institutions is necessary because of its unique attributes. This society is characterized by its choice of values and ways of life that are different from those of the general society in Israel, and views itself as rigorously committed to the Halacha (the collective body of Jewish laws; Braun, 2016; Fridman, 1991). The unique way of life and worldview of the ultra-Orthodox society, along with its communal solidarity and gender segregation comprise the society's prominent characteristics and lead it to isolate itself from the other ethno-cultural groups that combine the colorful mosaic of Israeli society, that is, to maintain sectorial segregation. This voluntary segregation is carried out by various means, such as separate educational systems, residency in separate towns or neighborhoods, inner social aid and support organizations and activities, and separate media of communication (Barth et al., 2020; Ben-Ami, 2013; Kaplan, 2003; Sofer-Furman & Kliner-Kasir, 2020).

Furthermore, ultra-Orthodox society comprises different groups and trends, of different and contradictory views concerning integration into employments and acquisition of higher education.

One group, for example, calls for maximal segregation and sees the Torah as absolute truth that passes from one generation to the next, the group itself being the continuation of Jewish tradition. This group objects to the admission of western culture, and therefore manifests a negative attitude towards the integration of general studies into their learning programs, integration into the employment market and higher education acquisition (Kalagy & Braun-Levinson, 2017; Kohener, 2020; Malchi et al., 2008). In contrast, another group believes in assimilation and the combining of Torah with the ways of the land. That is to say, members of this group support integration into the employment market, higher education acquisition and assimilation into the general society, along strict observance of Mizvot (Jewish commands), values and Torah learning (Kohener, 2020). Notably, in recent years, at the wake of demographic, economic, cultural and leadership changes that the ultra-Orthodox society has been undergoing, large ultra-Orthodox sectors have significantly changed their attitude towards entering the employment market and higher education acquisition, as they support the combining of Torah with courtesy (Malach, 2014; Teschner, 2014).

As to education, it is important to emphasize that Torah studies are of the highest value to ultra-Orthodox society, and serve to verify that the modern values prevalent in the surrounding general society would not infiltrate it. For this purpose, ultra-Orthodox society established an independent educational system characterized by gender segregation and singular school programs implemented in educational institutions for males and separately in educational institutions for females (Barth et al., 2020). Therefore, although the ultra-Orthodox society is a literate one, its formal education is of a low level. In this respect, however, there is a difference between school programs for females and for males.

The educational system for male students focuses mostly on holy scripture studies, and very little on core subjects such as language and math (Perry-Hazan, 2013; Shpigel, 2011). It provides the learners mostly with skills that would help them cope with the holy studies, such as independent learning and depth-thinking skills (Barth et al., 2020; Iluz et al., 2018; Tsemach et al., 2020). The educational system for female students, from elementary school to high school graduation, combines holy studies and core subjects that include, among other subjects, math, language, and English as foreign language (Perry-Hazan, 2013). Notably, the ultra-Orthodox educational system for female prevents them from taking the Bagrut exams of the general system, since these exams are the key to higher education, and the ultra-Orthodox society has no wish for their daughters to integrate into it (Barth et al., 2020). Inevitably, ultra-Orthodox men and women who are interested in integrating into higher education institutions face difficulties resulting from the learning program of their early years, such as academic gaps, mostly among men, due to lack of knowledge of core subjects and lack of academic skills (e.g., academic writing, English as foreign language etc.; Regev, 2016; Tsemach et al., 2020).

The integration of ultra-Orthodox society into higher education in Israel has become a clear trend in the last decade. Thus, in the 2020/2021 academic year, 14,700 ultra-Orthodox students enrolled for the first and second degrees, as compared to about 4700 in the academic year of 2010/2011. That is, the growth rate of ultra-Orthodox students integrating into academic studies in these years (2010/11-2020/21) was fast, at a growth rate of 220%, in comparison to the growth rate of 17.5% of the general student population (Kohener & Malach, 2021).

Studies dealing with the integration of ultra-Orthodox society in higher education in Israel examine the topic while focusing on the macro level – policy (Levi, 2021; Malach, 2014; Malchi, 2016b), or on the micro level – the ultra-Orthodox student (Malchi, 2017; Regev, 2016). There is little research on the topic from both angles at the same time. The current study examines the integration of ultra-Orthodox society into higher education in Israel from both angles – at the macro and the micro level – to delineate a broader and more comprehensive picture of extant policy and its effect on the integration of ultra-Orthodox society into higher education. The study utilizes a mixed methods approach, using quantitative and qualitative research tools.

The purpose of this study is twofold. Its first objective, at the macro level, is to analyze the policy of integrating the ultra-Orthodox into higher education institutions in Israel. The analysis is carried out by means of content analysis of policy documents (Knesset committees' protocols, decisions of the higher education council and the planning and budgeting committee) and interviews with key personalities who deal with the integration of ultra-Orthodox in higher education institutions. The analysis enables an easy identification of the voices of the policy makers and examines their position concerning the policy developed and implemented. The purpose of analyzing the policy, de-facto and de-jure, by two research methods, is to identify the voices rising from the documents and the interviews, merge them, examine the extent of accordance between them and the implementation of the policy in the field, and whether this policy suits the economic, social and cultural needs of ultra-Orthodox society. The second objective, at the micro level, is to analyze and identify the factors (economic, personal and social) leading to the integration of ultra-Orthodox students, both men and women, in practice, into the higher education system in Israel. This is done by looking into the relationships between individual characteristics (personal, family, academic) and higher education enrollment, choice of academic discipline and the need for tuition financing. To test these relationship, a series of statistical analyses were conducted, such as inter-correlations, mixed-design ANOVA, hierarchical regressions, and structural equation modeling (SEM).

Research findings

At the macro level, the findings comprised of four themes. The first theme, *the importance of integration*, zooms on the importance of integrating ultra-Orthodox students into higher education from the national perspective and from the inner ultra-Orthodox point of view. The findings indicate that integrating the ultra-Orthodox in higher education helps their integration into the work market, thereby contributing to developing the economy and society as a whole. Moreover, acquiring higher education helps the ultra-Orthodox find high-income, quality occupation that would improve their economic situation.

The second theme, *the policy of integration*, is on the principles of integration and policy implementation. The research findings indicate that the policy of integrating the ultra-Orthodox into higher education institutions suits the needs, characteristics and ways of life of ultra-Orthodox society. The policy leans on a number of principles expressed, among other things, by admission of students who fit the definition for the target population that can study in the academic frameworks for the ultra-Orthodox. In addition, ultra-Orthodox students study in classes and campuses that are sector- and gender segregated. Moreover, within study frameworks, the varied disciplines and subjects studied are suitable to the current work market needs, and the quality of teaching is strictly supervised. Furthermore, the study found that beyond opening academic programs for the ultra-Orthodox, policy implementation includes a system of assistance, academic and economic help and personal accompaniment.

The third theme is *challenges and obstacles*, zooming on challenges policy makers face while consolidating their integration policy, as well as the challenges the ultra-Orthodox students face while integrating into higher education institutions. The findings indicate that the policy of integrating ultra-Orthodox students into higher education has given rise to wide public criticism, mostly against the gender and sector segregation implemented in academic frameworks for the ultra-Orthodox, which, according to the critics' arguments, undermines equality and leads to discrimination against women lecturers who cannot teach in men's classes. In addition, the findings show that the ultra-Orthodox students cope with challenges within and without the campus grounds. For example, they cope with academic difficulties deriving from academic gaps in core subjects and lack of academic skills and qualifications. It is important to note that this obstacle leads to a high dropout rates in this population. Moreover, the ultra-Orthodox students have economic difficulties that makes it hard for them to finance their tuition, and need help and support to integrate into higher education institutions. Findings show that in spite of the economic aid these students receive, they have to cope with more payments and need grants according to their academic discipline. Furthermore, there is evidence that the ultra-Orthodox students cope with difficulties within their society of origin, since, within the ultra-

Orthodox society there are people who object to higher education. They fear that the ultra-Orthodox young people integrating into higher education would expose themselves to western culture and come out changed. That is, an ultra-Orthodox person who has integrated into higher education institutions would not get out as ultra-Orthodox as he was on entering them.

The fourth theme, *Objectives and policy tools* – zooms on the objectives and the policy tools for attaining them. The research findings indicate that objectives mostly focus on strengthening extant academic programs by means of expanding the numbers of ultra-Orthodox students and improving academic frameworks for the ultra-Orthodox, by reducing the number of students in each class. Another objective found focuses on expanding the academic programs for the ultra-Orthodox, by opening more fully segregated academic programs, encouragement towards advanced degrees and collaborations with study institutions for females. Furthermore, the research findings indicate that one of the objectives is to decrease gaps between ultra-Orthodox students and the rest of the students, by opening academic disciplines aimed at the requirements of the economy, among other things, in the academic frameworks for the ultra-Orthodox. It was also found that the policy makers have set the objective of promoting ultra-Orthodox students by better preparation for academic studies, preparing them for the work market and expanding the scholarship and loan programs.

At the micro level, the principal findings indicate that the relationship between the need for tuition financing and enrollment into higher education is stronger among men as compared to women. That is to say, men's enrollment into academic studies is conditional and depends on their tuition financing. Another finding indicates that the instrumental motive for studying is the most dominant one among students in general, both men and women. In other words, students' considerations concerning enrollment to studying involve their wish to improve their socio-economic status. Moreover, in the context of choosing an academic discipline, the dominant motive of all students generally relates to the profession characteristics. Namely, the choice of a specific academic discipline depends on the prestige attributed to the discipline, and access to the desired profession.

The research findings indicate congruence and interfacing points of the two levels of analysis (macro and micro). For example, at the macro level, document and interview analyses show that policy makers view the integration of the ultra-Orthodox as a means of helping and promoting the latter economically. Congruently, at the micro level, analysis of the factors leading to integration in higher education shows that the dominant motive for enrollment to studies among the ultra-Orthodox was instrumental, that is, the desire to improve their economic status.

The current study has broad theoretic, methodological, and practical ramifications, and its results might contribute to better and deeper understanding as to the integration of diverse groups into higher

education in general. Its theoretic contribution lies in the merging of the macro level (the state) and the micro level (the ultra-Orthodox students) in the examination of the issue of integrating ultra-Orthodox society into higher education in Israel. The methodological contribution lies in the use of mixed methods and of a number of research tools that investigate the issue at both the macro and the micro level, enabling deeper and better understanding. For practical purposes, the study might serve as a tool for examining the policy of integrating diverse groups into higher education. States worldwide that integrate students from various groups may use this easily adaptable study, owing to the fact that – given slight changes related to demographic questions – it is highly adaptable and suitable for the twofold – macro and micro – examination of policies.

The research limitations derive from the fact that the study focuses on the research population of ultra-Orthodox students currently enrolled into studying in the system of higher education. However, it does neither include ultra-Orthodox people who have not integrated into academic studies, nor the division into streams (Hassidic, Lithuanians and Sephardi) that exist in ultra-Orthodox society. Further recommended research that would investigate additional issues related to integration of ultra-Orthodox students in higher education institutions, using a larger sampling of ultra-Orthodox young people who are not included among the actual students, together with the division into streams, might yield additional aspects of integration and allow for deeper understanding of the diverse issues. In addition, the current study has not included a questionnaire concerning the stances of ultra-Orthodox students about the integration policy. Further research that would examine the ultra-Orthodox students' stances about the integration policy would find out whether the stances of the two sides – the policy makers on the one hand and the ultra-Orthodox students on the other hand – are congruent or not. This would indicate whether the extant integration policy is effective and efficient.