

# A SECOND CHANCE AT WHAT?

Public higher education in Israel is highly subsidized by the government which, in turn, uses matriculation (*bagrut*) exams to limit entry to colleges and universities to those students best academically prepared to utilize those resources. Since children from affluent, educated, high-expectation environments tend to score better on such tests than their disadvantaged counterparts, critics often accuse the system of perpetuating an undereducated, underemployed and underpaid under-class. By reducing the number of exams and the amount of material studied (1998), the Ministry of Education has increased the number of college-eligible students, but, even if causality could be demonstrated, it is not clear that these changes benefited the stronger students of weaker socio-economic groups rather than the weaker students of stronger socio-economic groups. The latter was the case in related studies in the U.S., U.K and Israel.

Prof. Hanna Ayalon, Prof. Yossi Shavit, and their colleagues have been acquiring, cleaning, coding and analyzing Israel Central Bureau of Statistics Data for the graduation cohorts of 1991-98 to help clarify the consequences of the *bagrut* exam reforms on the inequalities between social groups. A particularly

interesting example is their study of Israel's "second chance" system. This is not to be confused with alternative track education, in which supposedly weaker students are shunted into a vocational track education from which they, in fact, rarely emerge. Second-chance programs seek to correct errors made by the official selection mechanisms and by the affected individuals (who may have initially chosen not to take *bagrut* exams).

Unsuccessful or nonparticipating Israeli students can take "external" matriculation exams at any time. In practice, this usually benefits students paying for and attending private "external" schools that prepare them for the exams. Intensive government-subsidized one-year preparatory programs (*mechinot*) play a similar role. The external school population resembles that of Israel as a whole, with little over/under-representation (particularly at the program's end); but only a small percentage of graduates actually succeed in getting their matriculation certificate. About 13% of all students end up "second chancers." Second chancers include a disproportionate number of men, Mizrahim (Sephardim) and students from the vocational track. Their parental education is a little lower than average, but all have some secondary education. The researchers analyses show that men, Mizrahim, vocational-track students and lower-middle class students do indeed overcome much of their disadvantage through the second-chance channels,

Although the second-chance door swings open to welcome these students into academia, the researchers glumly report that the final results do not live up to early expectations. The odds that a second-chancer will ever get a degree is significantly lower than that of first-chancers, regardless of social origin. Once out in the world, the second-chancers also end up in less prestigious occupations, although they still do better than students with no *bagrut* at all. Thus second-chancers originate from lower-middle class strata, and their educational experience helps keep them there. Still, by protecting them from *downward* mobility, the system, at least, prevents the widening of existing gaps, a modest but non-negligible contribution. Further progress will depend on paying further attention to what can be done to affect post-*bagrut* success.

