

The Bar-Ilan University Magazine

BIU TODAY

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**Improving Urban Life
through BIU's
Smart Cities Project**

| 9

Tuning in to the Cocktail Party Effect | 13

Matching the Treatment to the
Patient through Personalized Medicine | 20

BIU's Contributions to the State of Israel | 36



Bar-Ilan University

The Road to Equality Runs through Academia

In his landmark speech in 2015, President Reuven Rivlin, Israel's 10th President, presented his vision for a "new Israeli order" – one which brings together under one roof the "four tribes of Israel." With Israel's Council for Higher Education (CHE) taking up this challenge, these days, you are just as likely to find children of secular Zionist, religious Zionist, *Haredi* and Arab origin in Israel's educational institutions as you are on the bustling streets in downtown Jerusalem – sparking hope for greater equality and coexistence on and off campus



The percentage of Arab university students in Israel – and at BIU – has risen significantly in recent years, thanks to national efforts to make academia more accessible to the Israeli Arab sector, helping them overcome challenges such as their socio-economic status, language, transportation, pre-academic preparation and housing.

During the 1995-6 academic year, Arab students made up only 7% of coeds attending Israeli colleges and universities. In 2000, that number grew to 10% and further swelled to 14% in 2016, to the point that roughly 36,000 out of the 310,000 men and women attending academic institutions in Israel came from the Israeli Arab sector.

While these numbers are still far from representing the Arab sector's share in Israeli society – 20% of Israel's population is Arab – they do point to a consistent and significant growth in the number of Israeli Arabs seeking a more promising future by acquiring advanced education.



Prof. Elinor Saiegh-Haddad

"In 1986, when I was studying for my undergraduate degree at Bar-Ilan University, I was the only Arab student in my department other than one PhD candidate. Few Arab students could be found on campus," recalls Prof. Elinor Saiegh-Haddad, the current head of BIU's English Language and Linguistics Department. "However, this year alone, 50% of the students in some of our first-year courses are Arab."

One way for Israeli academic institutions to meet the CHE's goals is through the *Hesegim* (accomplishments) program, which promotes academic studies and success among those living in Israel's social and geographic periphery, particularly Arab youth.

"As part of *Hesegim*, I visited 30 towns and villages, from the Bedouin town of Rahat in the south to Magdal Shams in the north to promote BIU," shares Rifat Sweidan, BIU's Academic Consultant for Minority Students.

"At Bar-Ilan, we offer Arab students a three-week course for academic studies, including an orientation and academic English and Hebrew classes. We prepare our prospective students for the realities of a multicultural campus such as BIU – during and outside of their academic studies."

BIU offers Arab students longer exam times, special considerations during religious holidays (for Muslim, Christian and Druze students) and Muslim prayer rooms. BIU's website offers Arabic translations of relevant texts and campus electronic message boards offer holiday cheer in Arabic during Muslim, Christian and Druze holidays.



Rifat Sweidan

What's more, BIU runs social activities, including field trips, theatrical productions, and musical dialogues (offered by the university's own Music Department), which aim to create a cultural dialogue between Jews and Arabs.

Currently, some 1,350 Arab students learn on campus – double the enrollment five years ago. "For many years, Bar-Ilan University was not the first institution of choice for Israeli Arabs," says Prof. Saiegh-Haddad. "But today, things have changed. BIU makes tremendous efforts to recruit and accommodate Arab students. As you can see, these efforts are proving to be successful."

She notes a significant increase in the number of Arab students working towards degrees at BIU in general. The English Department has seen particular growth. "It is entirely possible that the fact that the department head is Arab is a driving factor. Arab students might feel more comfortable, or on a more equal playing field with an Arab academic in charge."

As for the relationships between Jewish and Arab students, Prof. Saiegh-Haddad feels that there is good rapport and that the environment within the department is amicable and collegial.

Israeli Arab students tend to seek acceptance in paramedical and education-oriented fields, including medicine, physical therapy, and engineering, popular among Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs alike. About 15% of Arab students ultimately enter these fields, as opposed to only 6% of Jewish



Hiya Abu Gosh

students. Approximately 2% of all Arab students apply to medical school – twice as many as Jewish applicants. In the fields of social science and business administration, the sectors are almost balanced: 33% Arabs and 34% Jews.

"Most challenging are the language [Hebrew] and the different social norms," notes Hiya Abu Gosh, from Kfar Ara, a recent alumna of BIU's School of Optometry and Vision Science. "Growing up, I was surrounded by Arabs. But at the university, I suddenly found myself in a Hebrew-speaking environment. I knew Hebrew, but I wasn't accustomed to 'living' in it and studying in it."

Hiya praises not only the academic support offered by the university to non-native Hebrew speakers, but also the social activities, including the common field trips and the cultural dialogue program which promote co-existence. During her studies, Hiya served as the Arab students' representative at the BIU Student Union. "The university focuses on cooperation and co-existence and doesn't place much emphasis on politics," explains Hiya, noting that this is essential to fostering a positive relationship between Jewish and Arab students on campus.

Prof. Saiegh-Haddad adds that any activity aiming to promote dialogue between Jews and Arabs is welcome. "Even if we don't end up changing the world, we are still bringing both sides together, enabling them to join in on the conversation and listen to each other, without resorting to animosity or combativeness. That in itself is no small feat." ■