Excellence and Equal Opportunities in Higher Education - Conflicting Goals?

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1. Introduction

I will talk today about "excellence" and about "equal opportunities". Two concepts that are somewhat vague. But, don't worry, I will not fall into the trap of devoting the whole lecture to a discussion of definitions. Let me just say that by the concept "excellence", I refer to the academic goal of producing graduates who will be able to make discoveries, invent new technologies, transform social, legal and educational systems, write poems, compose music, lead their professions and set new intellectual standards. By "equal opportunities" I refer to the social target of limiting the impact of the differences between any two young people, differences that are clearly attributed to the fact that they were born into different social and economic environments.

On the face of it, these are two desirable but conflicting goals. Excellent students are, by large, not the same students who need to be admitted on the basis of equal opportunity claims. But I would like to argue that Tel Aviv University and the State of

Israel can and should launch an aggressive policy to advance both goals with not much conflict**.**

2. Excellence

Let me start with a presentation of a view about what is needed for promoting excellence among undergraduate students. I agree with Mrs. "Yiddishe Mame": All students are excellent, each in his own way. But, here, we are talking about the kind of excellence regarding what we, in the university, have (hopefully) the special ability to nurture: intellectual excellence. And…. may I say, not every student, even in this wonderful university, is an excellent student in this sense. The potential for academic and intellectual excellence is a rare trait either because nature did not endow everyone with the skills needed for a 21st century mini-Einstein or because the budding mini-Einstein has chosen, very legitimately I would say, other goals. However, it is my firm impression that Tel Aviv University is blessed with a large population of able students who are ready to study hard, very hard, to activate their abilities.

What do we need to do to help (or at least not disturb) excellent students to flourishing? We need to demand a lot from them. Early in their studies, we need to bring them to the very painful recognition that the easy time they had in high school is over. We have to discourage them from taking a route leading to short-term monetary gains and long-term shallowness. We have to guide them in building a broad pyramid of knowledge on the basis of which they will have to realize their own individual form of excellence. We should deter them from choosing too early an easy professional target, one that will

allow them to be just "OK professionals", and encourage them to begin their professional studies at a later stage of their days at the university.

I think that the fact that we allow and institutionally encourage superb students to limit their first degree to a narrow professional discipline is very wrong. Take, for example, the new undergraduate degree in Communication. Israel desperately needs excellent journalists. This new program attracts amazingly talented students dreaming of becoming a TV celebrity. Will a BA in communication really produce excellent reporters and media journalists? I doubt it very much. To be a serious journalist you need a wide background in a range of disciplines. You need to interact intellectually with the best minds in the country. The right thing to do is to train the excellent journalists to become media people only after they have completed a degree in Philosophy or History, Physics or Mathematics.

Students do not know what is required for excellence. We do not alert them early enough to what they need. We excessively praise our programs instead of admitting that many of these programs do not provide challenges for excellent students. Too often I hear professors arguing for a program that will "adjust to the demand". A university should be a free institution but it should first of all set standards for academic excellence. Such standards are not chosen democratically and are not the outcome of "supply equal demand" equations. We have the right and the obligation to decide upon the path to be followed by the young excellent student who wants to study here.

The problem is, of course, national. Israeli universities have expanded enormously in the last decade. The number of master's degree graduates has more than doubled within 10 years. But this does not necessarily indicate excellence. For example, more than 42% of the MA students received their degrees in the social sciences and management, faculties where the number of students who finished their master's degree with a dissertation has dropped dramatically, to about 25%.

To summarize this point: In order to promote excellence we should construct special programs which will prepare the talented student to proceed in either professional career or in the direction of advanced academic studies. But promoting excellence is a project that can be directed to probably no more than one-third of the total student body. For the others, it is not really relevant.

3. Do we have an "equal opportunities" problem?

Do we have an "equal opportunities" problem? Of course, we do. How do we know? I have to admit that I am content with the simple test of looking at the clothing of students on the grass of the university at the beginning of the year or at the first day of summer. It is not easy to extract information about the social and economic background of students from the standard data available in university records. Students are classified by their father's country of origin but, fortunately, many of our students are not only Israeli-born but even their parents are native Israelis.

Nevertheless, I looked at some of the numbers regarding TAU applicants. I searched for applicants living in two cities which are more or less equally distanced from Tel-Aviv

University: Ramat Hasharon, a upper middle class neighborhood north of Tel Aviv and Bat-Yam, a town south of Tel Aviv which is populated mainly by the descendants of immigrants who came to Israel in the fifties and very recent Russian immigrants. (By the way, I strongly recommend our visitors from abroad to pay a visit to Bat-Yam. An hour on Bat-Yam's promenade will teach you more about Israel than a day in the Israel Museum). We aren't talking about Netivut or Rahat or Kiryat Shmona, peripheral towns in every respect, but about two locations in the center of Israel. The population of Ramat Hasharon is 36 thousand and Bat-Yam's is 138 thousand, almost 4 times the size of Ramat Hasharon. The number of applicants from those two cities is about equal and the distribution of their "tziun hataama"is about the same. The general number of students admitted to the university was also similar. Quite interestingly, the number of students admitted to two of our university's prestigious professional undergraduate programs, Law and Accounting, was 21 from Bat Yam whereas it was 43 from Ramat Hasharon. Thus, we talking about a factor of at least 1:4 with respect to the relative chances of a young person from Bat-Yam versus Ramat Hasharon getting into TAU and of 1:8 with respect to the relative chances of being admitted to Law and Accounting.

Many of us conceive of education as one means for equalizing wealth and income in society. Education allocates what economists call human capital. If we could give all young people the same education, if we could succeed in equipping all of them with the same human capital, then we could balance the sharp increase in inequality in terms of income and assets. What we are observing here in Israel is that advanced education is amplifying the other inequalities. Needless to say that the main blame, if there is any, is not in the university system but in the immense differences in quality of elementary and

high school education in the Israeli system. We, in the university have to take those differences as given.

Accumulation of capital is much more problematic to deal with than is distribution of income. Knowledge and education are a sort of capital. The consequences of extreme inequality in distribution of capital, not only touch people's feelings, they also have to do with the distribution of power, influence and status. The social distribution of leading professionals such as lawyers, accountants or journalists determines whether we create an elite disconnected from society or an elite representing wide segments of the population.

By selecting students the university, whether we want it or not, allocates public resources. All universities heavily subsidize their students. Amazingly, even in the USA, there is almost no difference in the amount of subsidy per student (about 8 thousand dollars per year) given in any American university, public or private. The Israeli university system is heavily based on government funding. As you must know, about 2/3 of TAU's budget comes directly from the Israeli government. (Note, Tel-Aviv received 1999's budget a sum of money which support its 25 K students which is almost as high as the sum which goes to the 187 thousand yeshiva students supported by Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs.) Although we should insist that the curriculum taught be independent, I do not accept the view that the public cannot influence the allocation of its resources among its beneficiaries and I definitely don’t take it as an axiom that the matter is beyond the university concerns.

4. Should students be admitted solely on merit?

Students to this university, as to the other Israeli universities are admitted almost solely on the basis of a measure called "tziun hataama" which is a combination of their psychometric scores and high school grades. The law and social science faculties have very small "anti-discrimination" programs. The law faculty admitted about 20 students on such a program. The social science faculty admitted less than 10 students this year as almost impossible barriers of entry were set.

There is an open and vivid debate about the value of "tziun hataama". To my knowledge, the general impression is that this measure is a positive but weak predicator of the candidate's future success. Nevertheless, let us assume here, just for the sake of argument, that we do have in hand a reliable test in the sense that it provides an indicator of future academic grades. But now let me ask another question: Is it so obvious that we should admit students by merit?

Perhaps there is no alternative to use merit for selecting the top group of students, those bearing the stigma of excellence. Even on that I am not sure. When I studied mathematics at the Hebrew University, everyone could be admitted to the program; but 50% of the students had left before the first year's final exams. So, perhaps we may make do with providing the students with statistics about their chances of success.

But, my main task here is to cast doubt on the almost indisputable presumption that we should admit all students, especially to the professional schools, on the basis of merit. Of course we prefer to have superb lawyers and accountants and economists. We need

them just as we need good policemen and good civil servants and good cleaning people. Our admissions policies are mechanisms to allocate the more prestigious, valuable and even profitable slots to Israeli students. We talk about an allocation of valuable resources. And, let me remind you, we don't allocate our private assets. We allocate public resources. Is it really more important that lawyers and accountants in Israel have higher IQ than that the social distribution of lawyers and accountants will be more equal in Israeli's population? Do the differences in quality, even they exist, justify such an inequitable distribution of public resources between Ramat Hasharon and Bat-Yam?

5. What can be done?

I propose distinguishing between the university's two missions: paving the way for excellent students and granting a good professional education. To achieve the first mission, we should establish honors programs, challenging the top students and encouraging them to excel.

As to the second mission we should, in my opinion, incorporate the student's background as a criterion for admissions. We should probably set some minimal requirements. But beyond that, strong extra weight should be given to students coming from weaker neighborhoods, those characterized by low parental income, and not only to the very poor. Now, you may say this is very difficult and probably impossible. I beg to differ. Why can't we adopt some of the policies introduced recently in several of the USA states?

A few months ago, the state of California set a new admissions policy for the University of California (quite a good university, I think): According to the *Los Angeles Times* of March 19, 1999, and I quote, "Here is how the new admissions process would work: At the end of the high school junior year, UC officials will help public schools compile grade-point averages for students taking college-prep courses and then rank the students accordingly. Those in the top 4% of each of California's 863 public high schools--about 10,000 students--will be sent letters informing them that they are eligible for UC admission, provided they send in an application, complete all required college-prep courses and take the SAT and SAT II tests. "

And another example: I read the following in the application instructions sent by Texas State University (another quite good university, I think): "Graduates of accredited Texas high schools whose cumulative grade point average ranks them in the top 10% of their graduating class are automatically admissible to any Texas public university upon application as a first-time freshman during the twenty-four months following high school graduation."

To clarify, in both plans only a relatively small portion of the admissions are done on the basis of the local rankings and the vast majority of the students is still picked in the state-wide ranking.

Of course, such a method may lead to selecting students who, in some sense, are not quite as good than if a pure merit system was used. But the disadvantage of the plan is negligible when compared to its enormous advantages: A move forward in

compensating students from Bat-Yam who lacked the opportunities available in Ramat Hasharon. This method identifies students who have proved their ability to study in difficult surroundings. This plan encourages schools in weaker surroundings. With this plan, especially if supported by fellowship program, parents may hesitate to transfer their children to the so-called "better schools" as it will reduce their chances to be admitted to the public university. In the words of the California State Supt. of Schools: "The plan would inspire a culture of academic excellence and competition in those schools that historically send few, if any students, to the prestigious public universities."

6. Final Word

Israel is a country exhibiting strong processes of concentration of wealth among a relatively small number of people. Israel has not established any effective tools for redistributing wealth between generations. For example, the rate of inheritance tax in Israel is … zero. Universities are responsible for redistributing knowledge and power. This university should take a pioneering initiative in promoting both excellence and equality. Why don't we establish speical programs for the top 30% of the students and on the same time admit 30% of our students on the basis of being ranked first in their high school wherever it is or at least in the Metropolitan area of Tel Aviv? Tel Aviv University can and in my opinion should take the lead in promoting academic excellence while making this university a cultural center serving those from Bat-Yam to Ramat Hasharon rather than from Ramat Aviv Alef to Ramat Aviv Gimel.