



# Arabic and Arab Culture on Israeli Campuses: An Updated Look

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## Executive Summary

Currently there is an intense debate surrounding the use of Arabic in Israel. Recently attempts have been made to revoke Arabic's status as an official language in Israel and various studies show that in the last decade Arabic's status as an official language has been challenged in an unprecedented way. Indeed, Arabic serves as a proxy for social conflicts and competing values and visions within the state vis a vis the approximately 20% of Israeli citizens whose national identity is Arab. This situation is reflected in the university setting where Hebrew and English dominate and Arabic is nearly non-existent. Furthermore the almost complete absence of Arabic on campus – in signage, in courses and conferences and in terms of services offered – alienates Arab students and faculty alike linguistically, culturally and individually.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, with support from the European Union's Partnership for Peace Instrument, Dirasat, the Arab center for Law and Policy, Sikkuy: the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality, and the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute have embarked on a 2.5 year project which aims to increase the visibility of Arabic – and Arabs – in higher education in Israel. Our multi-pronged strategy consists of working with four targeted universities (Ben Gurion University, University of Haifa, Hebrew University and Tel Aviv University) to support the institutions in creating policy and practices which promote a more multi-cultural and inclusive campus. These goals complement targets established by Israel's Council for Higher Education (CHE) in its recent multi-year plan for increasing access to higher education among the Arab community. Among other things, the plan includes translation of websites into Arabic, the appointment of dedicated faculty members at each institution who serve as points of contact for Arab students and Arab issues on campus and other forms of economic and academic support. The report here represents an integral aspect of this program.

This report summarizes the findings of an investigation on barriers faced by Arab citizens in Israel studying within Israeli institutions of higher education. A number of fairly comprehensive studies have already examined the

cultural and social factors which inhibit Arab student success on campus. However, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the nature of individual institutions' policies and practices and ways in which these same universities can play a more effective role in helping all students to feel welcome on campus. Therefore the report summarizes the findings of a mapping process and offers campuses practical suggestions for improvement.

Importantly, the report also provides background on the important but relatively overlooked role of institutional climate in promoting student success. In studies on this topic, the vast majority conducted in the United States, campus climate has been identified to be a key factor in student retention and academic success. The social groups examined in these studies tends to be class, race or gender based while the topics of research on campus diversity and campus climate tend to focus on the experiences of the different groups, their perspectives on their own experiences, their expectations and their perceived feelings of alienation and/or exclusion. While we believe that much of this theoretical background can be relevant in Israel as well, it is important to add one other layer of complexity. The Israeli context is also influenced by questions of nationality (Jewish vs Arab) and the political context as well as the history of tension between Jewish national institutions including universities in their relations with the Arab minority. Nevertheless, to a large degree, the findings and policy suggestions generated from American research may be relevant in the local context.

This mapping specifically focused on issues we believe to be of particular relevance to students who belong to Israel's Arab minority. Thus, we primarily examined two factors which promote belonging in our context: the presence and status of Arabic on campus and the extent to which Arab cultural and social norms are present. Our findings were rather depressing; indeed, not a single campus managed to meet targets set by Israel's CHE in relation to translating their sites into Arabic; there is almost no Arabic signage on the campuses, there is little cultural life or activity on campus reflective of minority cultures and Arab faculty promotion is weak to non-existent. Consistent with comparative literature, we believe that Israeli campuses are oriented towards the needs of the Jewish majority – the dominant group in Israel. Arab students do not see their own linguistic, cultural, social or religious contexts on campus. This can generate feelings of social and cultural alienation, frustration and helplessness and certainly does not promote a sense of belonging or ownership in academia. In accordance with our findings, Israeli institutions of higher education – including the CHE – do not prioritize the creation of a multicultural campus.

Following from our mapping, we recommend the following:

- To increase and enforce standards established by the CHE regarding Arabic translation of university websites.
- To include Arabic in all signage on campus and provide computer keyboards with Arabic lettering.
- To consider Moslem and Christian religious holidays and Arab national holidays when developing university academic calendars and establishing exam times.
- To create campus regulations which promote Arab culture on campus with a specific emphasis on expressions of Arab culture in public space.
- To create and implement training programs for faculty and administrators aimed at sensitizing them to the needs and challenges of Arab-Palestinian students.
- To support and conduct serious and in-depth research investigating Arab students' experience on campus and in campus life, in order to develop concrete and appropriate plans of action.
- To initiate public discussions regarding this research and related studies. These forums should include relevant researchers, decision makers, public figures, civic society organizations active in this field, educators and more. Arab academics should be included in these discussions

This report was produced by Sikkuy and Dirasat with the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute serving in an advisory role.