



Press Release

Taub Center releases a new study by Nachum Blass on the bagrut exams in Israel. The study presents data that examines the claims of a decline in the difficulty of the exams and presents a proposal for reforming them

With the beginning of the bagrut (matriculation) exam season, the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel has released *Bagrut Exams: Issues and Recommendations for Reform* – a policy paper by Nachum Blass, a senior education researcher at the Center. The research shows that in the past few years there has been a recognizable trend towards improvement in various aspects of the bagrut exams, and contrary to frequent claims, there is no proof that a decline in the level of the exams is the cause of this change.

The primary piece of data on this issue is that the rate of individuals successfully completing the bagrut exams out of those taking the exams is steadily increasing. According to the study, the rate of students who receive the bagrut certification has risen from 46 percent in 2006 to 50 percent in 2012. This rise is especially significant in light of the growing size of population groups that do not take the exam [Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) and residents of East Jerusalem, whose combined percent in the relevant student population has risen from 12 percent to 18.5 percent] as well as the growth in the special needs population, which has a low rate of exam-takers.

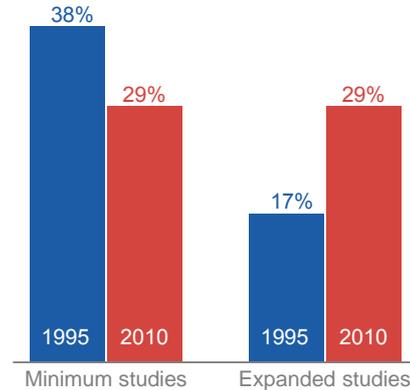
The Taub Center research found that between 2006 and 2012, the percent of those receiving the bagrut certification has risen significantly in most population groups: non-Haredi Jews (from 57 percent in 2006 to 67 percent in 2012), Arab Israelis (excluding East Jerusalem, from 35 percent to 42 percent), and Druze (from 44 percent to 55 percent). Nevertheless, in two population groups, there was no change: Haredim (8 percent received bagrut certification in both 2006 and 2012) and Bedouin (28 percent in 2006 and 29 percent in 2012).

In Blass' words, the rise in the rate of bagrut qualification is apparently not due to a decline in the level of the exams: "Although there have been changes in the past to the exams, and amongst them a reduction in the amount of material required (units of study) as well as the addition of both second and third testing opportunities for students to improve their scores, these changes are not indicative of a change in the quality of the tests themselves. There is no research evidence that the central parameters on which the pupils are tested – the level and depth of understanding of the materials, analytical skill and ability to effectively express oneself – have been compromised, or that the questions are any easier or more difficult than those of the past."

The Taub Center study found that Israeli pupils do not study fewer hours than in the past, but rather, more. As can be seen in Figure 1, between 1995 and 2010 the percent of pupils studying the minimum number of units required for a bagrut (21 study units) declined from 38 percent to 29 percent, while the percent of pupils who chose to study for an extended bagrut (31 units of study or more) rose from 17 percent to 29 percent.

Figure 1
Rate of those taking the bagrut exams at the minimum and expanded levels*, 1995 and 2010

as a percent of all of those taking the bagrut exams



* Minimum level studies – 21 study units,
 Maximum level studies – 31 study units

Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel
 Data: Ministry of Education

Another measure that is indicative of the level of those qualifying for a bagrut certificate

is the average score on the psychometric exam, which is similar to the SAT exam in the United States. Since the psychometric exams are calibrated, comparisons over time can be made and a decline in scores can be taken as evidence of a lower quality system. The data show, however, that the quality of individuals accepted to most academic institutions has actually risen (for example, the average psychometric score for acceptance to universities increased by 15 points between 2002 and 2012, from 603 points to 618). Only in the academic colleges without governmental funding, where the number of students has risen steadily in the past decade, have the scores of accepted students significantly declined (from 553 to 532 points).

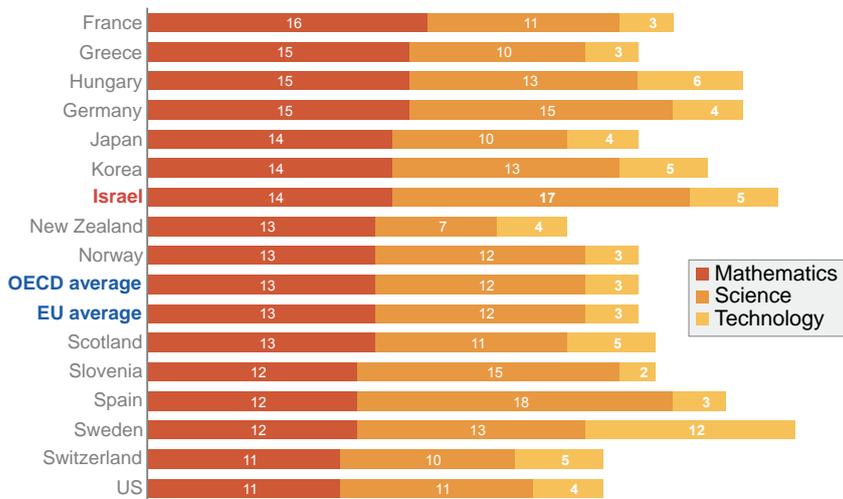
Technology studies from the perspective of the bagrut exams

Another common claim is that the scope of science education in Israel is limited. In the Taub Center study, the number of hours of science and technology study in middle school (ages 12-14) was compared to the averages of Western countries and found to be among the highest (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Percent of learning hours devoted to mathematics, sciences and technology, 2010

as a percent of all learning hours for pupils aged 12-14, selected countries in the OECD and the EU



Source: Nachum Blass, Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel
Data: OECD, 2014

In addition, Blass found that between 1995 and 2010, the share of those taking bagrut exams in mathematics, physics and biology, as well as those passing and excelling in these exams rose. In fact, these increases were far greater than the rise in the number of those studying these subjects in the relevant population (except for the case of chemistry), **such that rather than speaking about a crisis in the teaching of the sciences, it would be more appropriate to note significant achievements.**

A proposal for reforms in the bagrut exams

Various parties have a range of critiques of the bagrut exams in their current formulation, including claims that they make the educational process superficial, are not representative of the fields of study and the necessary skills required for graduates in their future lives, are expensive to administer and result in a great waste of school days.

Over the years, in an attempt to address these concerns, there have been many recommendations for reform of the bagrut exams, although most have not tried to fundamentally change the structure of the bagrut exams at the core. In contrast, Taub Center researcher Nachum Blass proposes in this study a wide-ranging reform wherein the bagrut exams would be comprised of three components:

- **Tools** – this will include the subjects that are considered essential tools for integration into adult society: mother tongue, a foreign language, civics, computer skills, and possibly also mathematics. The exams in this component will be computerized and conducted in national testing centers. Each examinee will be allowed to take the test multiple times and the highest score will be used in the calculation of the final bagrut certificate.
- **Knowledge** – this includes the other subjects, compulsory as well as elective. The grade in this component will be determined by the school, calculated on the basis of the pupil's average score over the last three years and based on the evaluation

methods as determined by each educational institution: final exams, exams and projects, independent study, etc.

- **Values** – this includes an evaluation by the educational staff of the pupil's performance on a number of non-academic behavioral and values components, such as volunteerism, effort and diligence.

Adopting this proposal would promote the value of the bagrut certificate as a motivator (pupils will have to devote their full energy to three years of study and not purely preparation for the exams), and leave intact the role of the exams as a selection tool for institutions of higher learning. At the same time, this new program could save hundreds of millions of shekels that are budgeted for the process of writing and reviewing the exams and paid to teachers to prepare for the tests, and would serve to strengthen the educational and values-oriented aspects of the school's activities.

The Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel, headed by Professor Dan Ben-David, is an independent, non-partisan institution for socioeconomic research based in Jerusalem. The Center provides decision makers, as well as the public in general, with a big picture perspective on economic and social areas. The Center's interdisciplinary Policy Programs – comprising leading academic and policy making experts – as well as the Center's professional staff conduct research and provide policy recommendations in the key socioeconomic issues confronting the State.

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