

When the disadvantaged become the advantaged

HAIFA — How do universities really decide who should be accepted as students, and who turned a w a y ?

Americans will recall the famous Bakke case in which a white student had been rejected by the University of California Medical School, while under the so-called affirmative action programs, a place was reserved for a less qualified applicant from a minority group. In that case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that discrimination against a white student was still discrimination, and he was ordered admitted.

The curtain has just been lifted on an interesting but controversial experiment in Israel which gave preferential university admission to disadvantaged, or



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what was called opportunity-deprived, students. Spread over a four-year period, from 1977 to 1981, 66 applicants for admission to the Hebrew University School of Social Work, who met all the necessary criteria for acceptance, academic and otherwise, were turned down. In their place 66 opportunity-deprived students were taken in. Average annual freshman class was 120. How well did they do? Was the experiment worth while? Was it continued?

The story is publicly told for the first time in a just published monograph by Eliezer Jaffe, titled "Unequal by Chance" (Geffen Pub. House, Jerusalem. 72 pp).

Jaffe repeats what we all know: that Israeli society "is clearly stratified on economic, social and even ethnic variables," with the Sephardi, or students of North African and Asian origins, finding it difficult to overcome their handicaps. The University's Central Admissions Committee approved his plan for breaching the standard criteria, enabling acceptance of less qualified students up to about 16 percent of the freshman class. The formula for selection of the disadvantaged included such factors as parents' lack of formal education, family

size, ethnic background and neighborhood.

The lucky special students were classified on the records into two groups, one chosen to receive tutorial and financial help, and the remainder left to compete with the cream of the class on their own. Only those to receive the extra help were informed of the special circumstances of their acceptance, presumably to stimulate greater effort on their part.

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What were the results? After the four-year experiment had been completed, and the last of the classes had finished their three-year program leading to the degree of bachelor of social work, the figures were studied. Of the regularly qualified students, 14 percent failed for academic reasons, and an additional 13 percent left for other reasons, so that only 73 percent ended up with their degrees. Of the disadvantaged who received help, 26 percent failed, and 74 percent got their degrees. Of the control group of disadvantaged who were left on

their own, 32 percent failed, and 67.6 percent earned their degrees.

How well did they do in their grades? On a scale of 100, the regular admissions achieved a final grade point of 74.6. The disadvantaged in each of their groups were almost identical, with 71.9 and 71.6.

An attempt to follow up the graduates and ascertain to what extent they were still engaged in social work was inconclusive.

The experiment did not go unnoticed in academic circles, and there were many repercussions. There was expression of resentment at the waste of special tutorial and financial support for the unqualified disadvantaged group, help which could have been used to greater advantage for the weaker regular admission students.

The University's Professional Committee on Screening and Admissions, after studying results, came to the conclusion that they "do not show reason to admit disadvantaged students under special conditions," and this was later upheld by the rector. There were some who claimed that because of the lack of resources, it was better to invest in the brightest students, "in order not to create a mediocre Israeli society."

Jaffe, who was in charge of

the experiment, reports the facts objectively, but makes no secret of his disappointment that the project was discontinued. He insists that the present method of selecting students is not the fairest and most efficient since it leans to cultivating the talents of the few, and thereby helps perpetuate inequality.

Had it not been for the experiment, these many dozens of now practicing social workers, drawn from the under-privileged community, would never have been given their chance to get in university. But what about the many dozens of other students who measured to the entrance requirements, and in theory were superior candidates, but were turned down to make place for the less qualified but now more privileged?

Jaffe titles his final chapter "Meritocracy versus Impulism," and notes that the different reactions to the search findings reflect differences of ideological and social values and beliefs. He is disappointed that the universities do not take a "much larger and active role reaching out to disadvantaged populations." He warns that they can "prodded in this direction need be, by external as well as internal forces," sound almost like a battle cry.