

# How do Students from the Arab Sector in Israel Perceive the Impact of Socio-Economic Situation on Students' Decision to Drop Out of Higher Education Institutions?

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## Abstract

This research investigates Arab students' perceptions of how socio-economic challenges influence their decisions to drop out of higher education in Israel. Examining student dropout is important given increased concerns about student dropouts from higher education, as well as inequality in educational attainment in marginalized communities. Exploring Arab students is an important first step to fill in the gap on how structural elements - poverty, family obligations, culture, and lack of institutional support - contribute to students' decisions to drop out of higher education. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the research used semi-structured interviews with 40 former Arab students to acquire a narrative of their experiences. It became evident from the results, that financial barriers, lack of institutional support, and socio-cultural pressure were the biggest challenges to persistence in their studies. In conclusion, this study suggests dropout is a collective and socio-economic-derived decision rather than an individual choice. Further, and as a means to improve students' chances of persistence, recommendations can be made for culturally sensitive advising, financial aid, and continued resources. This study contributes to the theoretical literature on student retention and social equity, and practically, the study can further articulate policies to minimize student dropout, specifically for minority college students in higher education in Israel.

**Keywords:** Arab students, higher education, dropout, socio-economic status, educational inequality, cultural expectations, financial hardship, institutional support, student retention, Israel.

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## 1. Introduction

The objective of this research is to examine how Arab students in Israel perceive the role of socio-economic conditions in deciding to drop higher education, as there is a growing concern about student dropout and retention rates, and focusing on the voices and experiences of Arab students required exploring the most marginalized students who experience the compounding effect of factors such as poverty, familial traditional cultural expectations, and institutional neglect. With a qualitative study design, the study collected rich qualitative data through semi-structured interviews of Arab students, who withdrew completely from academics. The primary research question that guided this research is: "How do students from the Arab sector in Israel perceive the influence of socio-economic situation on students' decisions to leave higher education". The findings reveal that the influence of financial struggle, family obligations, lack of academic means, and emotional stress played significant roles in students' decision to withdraw. This research also provides recommendations driven by student's perspectives to retain students to stay, by giving them financial aid and applicable, culturally relevant student advisory systems, alluding that institutional support systems should be more accessible and easily usable.

This research engages with several recurrent themes in the literature on dropout, socio-economic status, cultural and status pressure, and educational inequality. In this study, dropout

is understood as a process shaped by personal and structural factors (Faisal et al, 2023), socio-economic status is considered to refer to the social and financial circumstances around access to education (OECD, 2022). Arab students in Israel often come from communities located in the most economically disadvantaged or low socio-economic clusters. As highlighted by Khalaily and others (2023), 39% of Arab families and nearly half of all Arab children are reported as living below the poverty line. Cultural pressures placed upon children within their family contexts, especially within traditional patriarchal families, adds different layers of responsibility and conflict between fulfilling home obligations versus academic obligations. This research also adds to a limited understanding of how these compounding factors intersect to produce the conditions where educational disengagement occurs, especially among groups of students belonging to underrepresented communities and who do not have a history of access to equitable resources, or representation in Israeli higher education (Ali, 2024; Meler & Marnin-Distelfeld, 2024).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to guide policy and institutional changes to address the dropout rates of Arab students. The student, in their own words, pointed out the gaps in support systems; for example, a lack of culturally responsive advising and financial support, and how their realities overlapped with larger socio-political inequities. The qualitative interview methodology allowed the researcher to discover multi-layered meaning that statistics might miss (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). The findings suggest that there is a need for culturally responsive academic advising, targeted financial aid, and continued mental health support services. These recommendations align with broader frameworks concerned with equity, like those of Salmi and Daddio (2020), and have the capacity to advance access and success for Arab higher education students.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Dropping out from Higher Education:*

In recent years, especially during the pandemic, higher education institutions around the world have had to grapple with students not completing their studies, known as dropout/attrition rates. In Europe, nearly one-third of students do not complete their studies (Kehm et al., 2019). Slovenia has one of the highest rates for first-cycle students in the world; 40% of first-cycle students leave higher education without completing it compared to the OECD average of 23% (OECD, 2022). There are a few studies that have identified the factors related to dropout rates are national policies, institutional policies and practices and individual situations. National factors and policies that may include issues of access to higher education at the national level, intersection with individual issues such as motivation, socio-economic background influencers, and regionally, connected with institutional resources, access to higher education are ways to shape future situations (Nurmalitasari et al., 2023).

Studies also indicate that dropout is a complex outcome that occurs from a variety of factors including personal characteristics of students, family environment, institutional actions (including resources dispensed), and labor market conditions (Aina et al., 2018). Frameworks for dropout, such as Tinto's (2006) student retention framework and Bean's (1983) occupational mobility theory, have long highlighted the importance of integration into an academic community as well as institutional commitment to resources and personal satisfaction as critical main factors for limiting dropout. Technology has added a new layer to the mix and machine learning techniques are increasingly used (for example) to predict dropout based on demographic and academic information from institutions (Salinas-Chipana et al., 2024). While the online context has also introduced unique obstacles, given that completion rates appear lower than in other contexts, it is still driven by the course design, institutional resources spent (and/or lack of resources), and a sense of belonging in the context (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Overcoming those

obstacles in one way or another is necessary and schools need to develop programs for engagement, to educate and train institutions to redeploy resources, and to accommodate students with diverse needs across educational contexts.

## **2.2 The Arab Sector in Israel:**

The Arab population of Israel, including East Jerusalem residents with "permanent resident" status, represents around 21.1% of the population. In terms of geographic distribution, the Arab population is situated across northern Israel, the Triangle, the Negev, mixed Arab-Jewish cities, and the Jerusalem corridor (Haddad Haj-Yahya et al., 2021). The Arab population is diverse as well in terms of religious composition: Muslim-82.9% (Islam: 82.9%); Druze-9.2% (Druze: 9.2%); and Christian-7.9% (Christianity: 7.9%); socioeconomic challenges (e.g., poverty rates and income levels) exists as most Arab localities are in the lowest clusters of the Israeli socioeconomic index, and poverty among Arab families is higher compared to Jewish families. Although Arab citizens have made some progress in education and employment there remain sizable gaps in economic income, decision-making, and public services access (Israel Democracy Institute, 2021).

The demographic and cultural distinctions between Jewish and Arab cultures in Israel are significant. Generally, households in Arab society are larger, educational levels are lower and household income is also lower when compared with Jewish society (Ali, 2024). Traditionally, Arab society in Israel has been described as collectivist, patriarchal, and conservative. There have been significant changes in recent years however, as a result of increasing individualism and the speed of technological improvements. These recent changes in Arab society have also included reductions in birth rate, increasing numbers of women in education and workforce participation, and increases in support for values including independence, equality and democracy, especially from youth (Meler & Marnin-Distelfeld, 2024).

## **2.3 Arab Socioeconomic Status:**

The socioeconomic situation of the Arab community in Israel can give a sense of significant inequities and systemic challenges when compared to Jewish society. The 2023 Statics Report finds that nearly all Arab localities (95%) are in the bottom five clusters on the Israeli index of socioeconomic status, whereas the very majority of Jewish localities are found in the top five clusters on the same index. Similarly, there are significant differentials based on poverty, with 39% of Arab families and 49.1% of Arab children living under the poverty line, as well as relatively lower rates of poverty for Jews (15.9% for families and 21.4% for children). There are stark disparities in relation to employment opportunities, particularly for women where only 33.7% of Arab women are employed compared to 65.8% of Jewish women. There are significant barriers to access to economic participation, with Arab workers primarily working in hourly pay and lower salaries, and the average wage across Arab localities (NIS 8,973) is significantly lower than average Israeli salaries and significantly lower than average salaries in Jewish localities (NIS 14,035). These inequities contribute to serious problems in economic security, as well as access to good, equal quality infrastructures and services. Reversing these trends will depend on targeted economic policies that would provide employment access, training, skills, education and improve overall economic stability that would integrate the Arab community into the socio-economic fabric in the rest of Israel (Khalaily, et al, 2023).

## **3. Material and Methods**

The current study was based on a qualitative research methodology to deeply investigate how students from the Arab sector in Israel perceive the influence of socio- economic factors on their decision to drop out from higher education. Qualitative research was selected

because it enabled exploration of participants' subjective experiences with depth, allowing the researcher to generate rich, thick descriptions from the individual narratives containing personal or contextual influences behind educational disengagement (Dahal et al., 2024). Qualitative methodology accommodates studies targeting the exploration of meanings, attitudes, and interpretations in social contexts while seeking to explore difficult concepts and representations around complex social issues such as financial hardship and cultural expectations (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). The use of qualitative methods can promote the uncovering of nuanced socio-economic realities that usually only quantitative surveys would miss, particularly within marginalized or underrepresented populations.

The primary data collection method in the study was the semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to freely explain their experiences and provides opportunities for the researcher to follow up on developing themes. Semi-structured interviews are an established approach in qualitative research specially to investigate perceptions, beliefs, and lived experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). Regarding the objective of the study, the semi-structured interview was conducive to obtaining answers which reflected the individual and collective barriers faced by Arab students in higher education, including financial instability, cultural restrictions, and parents' expectations. The final interview questions were developed according to the objectives of the study, and were piloted with other students to ensure clarity and aid in any cultural understanding. Each semi-structured interview was held in a confidential and safe space, and participants were free to reflect on their own language when discussing their reasons for dropping out as well as other socio-economic pressures which exacerbated their reasons.

#### 4. Results

The following section presents the key findings of this study, derived from in- depth semi-structured interviews with Arab students in Israel who dropped out of higher education. The results are organized thematically to reflect the participants' lived experiences and perspectives on how socio-economic challenges influenced their educational paths. Through their narratives, six major themes emerged, highlighting the complex interplay between financial instability, cultural expectations, institutional neglect, and emotional strain. These themes offer a comprehensive understanding of the structural and personal barriers that Arab students face, and provide insight into their coping strategies as well as their recommendations for institutional change. Together, the findings paint a multifaceted picture of educational disengagement and dropout, grounded in systemic inequality and unmet support needs.

##### ***Theme 1: Perceived Impact of Socio-Economic Status on Higher Education Dropout***

Participants unanimously underscored the profound influence of socio- economic background on their ability to persist in their educational experiences. One student remarked, *"I never really felt like university was meant for someone like me... it always felt like something for people who didn't have to think about paying rent or working nights."* The exclusion associated with having an economic disadvantage is mirrored in Dallasheh (2025), whose study found marginalization pertinent to structural inequalities and the under-representation of Arab students within Israeli academia negatively impacted academic motivation. One of the participants also remarked, *"Honestly, no matter how hard I've tried, the gap between me and pretty much everyone else -- was always there -- because they had all the support and all the resources and time."* It can be noted that this feedback appropriately aligns with Haneen (2023), who pointed out that, as a result of social economic discontinuities, Arab students are frequently without essential academic resources or stimulation and consequently remain at a certain level where they cannot competitively function within historical spaces of education.

### **Theme 2: Financial Hardships and Educational Insecurity**

The interviews suggest that for many participants, the immediate and unsupportable hurdle in continuing education was financial stress. For example, one student explained that he had *"to weigh costs of tuition against just helping [his] parents with bills, dropping out was not a choice, it was survival"*. This is similar to the conclusion made by Refaeli and others (2022), who state that poverty among Arab families can lay a significantly adverse barrier to educational attainment, particularly when students are required to financially contribute to the home. In another example, one participant recounted that he was *"I was working with my father and failing my exams. There was no other way to support myself while studying"*. Both of these participants indicate the double burden many Arab students must experience when balancing academic studies with work commitments, which is described as a primary barrier to educational attainment for sociologically underserved youth in Israel (Bar- Haim, 2024).

### **Theme 3: Family Responsibilities and Cultural Pressures**

Participants did not hesitate to point out how their family obligations and cultural expectations got in the way of their educational goals. A female participant explained, *"As the oldest daughter, I had to look after my siblings and keep the house. School was never our priority - it was a privilege."* These narratives were also supported by the evidence provided by Alqahtani and Abouelwafa (2025) that explained that in Arab families, particularly in traditional or patriarchal families, family commitments often take precedence over the educational aspirations of the individual. Another student stated, *"My parents wanted me to do well, but they also wanted me to work and help the family. It is difficult to do both."* Cultural expectations, while intended to be supportive and originate from a place of solidarity, can pose major barriers to continued education when institutions do not honor this reality (Bernard, 2024).

### **Theme 4: Academic Engagement, Mental Well-being, and Socio-Economic**

#### **Background**

Socioeconomic stress contributed negatively to students' educational engagement and mental health. One student explained, *"I could never pay attention in class because I was always worried about how I would pay debt or how I would get money. I felt like I was never fully there."* There is a sense of distress and disengagement consistent with the findings of Ibrahim-Dwairy and Dwairy (2021), who found Arab students in Israel faced greater academic stress related to economic hardship and weak institutional supports. Another student commented: *"When you're poor, you're tired. Tired from working, tired from worrying, tired from trying to keep up."* The cumulative toll of socioeconomic stress can lead to burnout which contributes to students' disengagement from their education, consistent with research by Abu-Kaf and Khalaf (2020).

### **Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms and Informal Support Systems**

Students relied on informal support when they did not have formal support. One student said, *"My cousin helped me, and I shared rides with friends. We helped each other because we had no one else."* Peer solidarity, family pooling resources, and self-reliance were the most prominent coping strategies. These informal supports rarely provided ongoing academic support. According to Cohen-Azaria and Zamir (2021), Arab students rarely had access to institutional support in the form of student mentors, academic advisors, or mental health services, which meant they had navigated hardship for the most part on their own. One participant shared, *"I never had a counselor or advisor. No one bothered to ask how I was."* These findings show a systemic gap in student support for lower-income and marginalized communities.

### ***Theme 6: Students' Recommendations for Policy and Institutional***

#### ***Interventions***

The participants were definitive about the changes they believed were needed to enhance retention and reduce dropouts among Arab students. One student explained, *"There should be special scholarships for people like us, who don't get financial help from home."* Others called for cultural competency in academic advising: *"We need an advisor familiar with our culture—someone who understands why I have to miss a class for a family emergency."* These ideas are also supported Salmi and Daddio (2020) recommendation for higher education institutions in Israel to construct inclusive policies and targeted funding models as a response to structural inequality affecting access and retention. A different participant described, *"We need more support, not merely funds, but someone who actually monitors and assists us along the way."* These recommendations represent points of departure for the development of policy frameworks that acknowledge the intersection between economic disadvantage and cultural identity.

## **5. Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine students' perceptions of socio-economic factors affecting their decision to withdraw from institutions of higher education. Since this study was qualitative, it provided a rich, contextual understanding of how financial burden, family obligations, cultural expectations, and institutional support (or lack of) cohere to influence academic lives. This analysis reinforces that dropout is a multidimensional phenomenon, similar to extensive competing international research that echoes sentiments regarding student dropout constellations (Aina et al., 2018; Kehm et al., 2019). This study also aims to add to more localized knowledge regarding dropout in the context of the Arab community in Israel, and how socio-economic disadvantage is both retrospectively entrenched and contemporarily atomized (Khalaily et al., 2023). The following discussion analyses the themes developed from the students' narratives in relation to extant literature, whilst offering similar overlaps in terms of systemic barriers towards educational upward mobility in Israeli institutions of higher education, for Arab students.

one key results from this study is that students perceived the impact of their socio-economic background on their chances of persisting in higher education. Students described feelings of exclusion and inadequacy noting that some even felt like the university was built for students that had available resources and support system that they did not have. Their sense of not belonging mirrors the marginalization that was evident in Dallasheh's (2025) works that demonstrated that Arab students in Israeli's academia have challenging experiences of exclusion from institutional processes, primarily due to their underrepresentation and systemic and longstanding inequitable practices. As Haneen and others noted (2023) outlined, within the lack of academic resources (and consequently preparation) applicable to Arab students in higher education contribute to disengagement and self-doubt. Each of these issues relates to the wider literature where concerns have been raised regarding not all students adapting to the academic and social life of a university, especially for disadvantaged backgrounds.

Financial difficulties were the most relevant and immediate barrier to studying. Students indicated that often putting food on the table would take precedence over their education. That means students juggle their own financial survival, to support their families, with their responsibility to perform academically. This is consistent with the work of Refaeli and others (2022) who found that poverty is a huge factor in the

educational life of Arab students. Many of the students were forced to work multiple jobs or drop out completely when the cost of living or tuition was too high. This can be perceived as what Bar-Haim (2024) notes to be a continuous structural disadvantage, where not only are Arab students more likely to experience economic disadvantage, institutionally they also are not given the same financial support as their peers, making their education unsustainable.

Another important finding was the influence of family responsibilities and cultural expectations on students' academic persistence. Participants referenced expectations placed upon them to contribute to household chores or put family responsibilities leading them to push aside actual course responsibilities altogether. Female students were particularly challenged by traditional gender roles placed on them to become caregivers and to uphold domestic labor. Gendered dynamics were consistent with Alqahtani and Abouelwafa's (2025) findings which indicated that patriarchal value systems in Arab society can be at odds with the demands of academic life. Notably, Bernard (2024) thought the same and argued that without educational institutions understanding students' cultural backgrounds, students from a collectivist perspective may be asked to choose between family obligations and personal goals.

The study further revealed the psychological impacts socio-economic stress incurs on students' well-being and academic engagement. As noted by participants, they experienced severe anxiety, exhausting, and emotional drain that made it difficult for them to read, study, or engage in academic life at all. This feeling of burnout, coincides with the work of Ibrahim-Dwairy and Dwairy (2021), who found evidence that Arab students in Israel experience greater academic stress as a result of socio- economics, particularly financial constraints and lack of access to supportive services. Similarly, Abu-Kaf and Khalaf (2020) found chronic stress and fatigue could result in declining motivation and ultimately withdrawal from areas of education. This highlights the need to establish and support comprehensive support systems that acknowledge not only academically related support but emotional and psychological support for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Due to the absence of formal institutional supports, students tend to turn to informal coping methods. Students explained that they relied on family, friends, and peers for emotional support, shared resources, and logistical support. Though these informal supports provided temporary relief, they do not meet the level of support needed for a more complex academic or psychological need. This is consistent with the findings of Cohen-Azaria and Zamir (2021) that Arab students in Israel do not have structured mentorship, advising or counselling services. Overall, these informal systems provide some assistance, but cannot replace the systematic supports that students need in order to remain in school and be successful. Students are still marginalized in the academic system and the lack of accessible and culturally- competent support services, he further intersects, that only reinforces these experiences.

Ultimately, students in the study provided a multitude of feasible recommendations for addressing their obstacles. Several recommended establishing financial aid initiatives that are specifically aimed at Arab students and academic advising for Arab students that is cognizant of their cultural and family contexts. These recommendations are consistent with the policy recommendations proposed by Salmi and Daddio (2020), who proposed that inclusive policies for higher education in the Arab world require not only the implementation of culturally responsive advising provided by knowledgeable academic advisors, but also the establishment of targeted funding models. Students also highlighted a need for ongoing guidance and monitoring from university staff, emphasizing that success only comes from continuous support,

rather than a one-time intervention. These recommendations indicate that structural change needs to occur on many levels in higher education institutions, and there better a better understanding of policy that recognizes the amalgamation of cultural identity and economic struggle.

## 6. Conclusion

The current study, while focused on the views of Arab students in Israel, has provided important insights into how socio-economic conditions interact and ultimately contribute to Arab students' decision to withdraw from higher education. Students who described experiencing multiple challenges related to financial hardship, cultural expectations, bureaucratic and institutional barriers, and emotional distress constituted a significant part of this study. Each of these socio-economic factors operated interactively and the intersectionality of these complex but related issues often caused them to drop out of higher education. The qualitative interviews provided a measureable component to their lived experiences and added more dimension to the research by providing a contextually -based perspective on educational inequality in Israel. The accounts we gathered conducted forth to complement other studies (Dallasheh, 2025; Haneen, 2023) that frame exclusion within structural or systemic aspects of the institutional experience for Arab students. Most importantly, this study illustrates how turning away from educational and cognitive engagement is not only about choice or capacity, but how socio-economic and institutional contexts influence student disengagement and withdrawal to drop out.

The synthesis of key findings has revealed that financial difficulty was in fact the most pressing and salient dropout factor amongst students. A number of students faced a binary choice between pursuing their educational goals or meeting immediate familial and economic obligations. Cultural perspectives, particularly in traditional, patriarchal families, added complexities to decisions around a potential student dropout, especially for women. The interplay of these familial commitments culturally and academically would often go unnoticed by institutions of higher education despite many students being put in a position of needing to evaluate these pressures. Additionally, the psychological ramifications of these compounded pressures were extraordinarily challenging for students, and greatly influenced their mental well-being, motivation, and engagement in academic activities. Without access to culturally responsive support networks or formal financial aid, many students faced these challenges unsupported. Even though their coping strategies of relying on informal supports such as peer and family networks were commendable, their reliance highlighted a gap in institutional accountability.

The important takeaway from the study is that socio-economic barriers are not only prevalent, they are often hidden in higher education institutions' policies and practices. The voices of Arab students suggest that universities need to reconsider how they assist minority and low-income groups, specifically with their calls for practical, feasible changes: appropriate financial aid responses, culturally responsive academic advising, and monitoring student wellness over an extended timeframe. Student suggestions, like those mentioned previously, have been recommended in other policy- related research, including Salmi and Daddio (2020), who reinforce the importance of creating systems of inclusion and responsiveness in higher education. This lack of coordinated formal assistance continues to be an enormous gap that prevents many Arab students from accessing the same opportunities as Jewish students, and thus re- affirms the gaps in access opportunities and disadvantage already built into Israeli society.



There are some limitations to the current study and unanswered questions. This study examines perceptions from a single marginalized group of students, and does not take into consideration that experiences may differ based on gender, region, or institutional type. Future studies should explore experiences in future studies in greater breadth and depth, perhaps with comparisons across Arab sub-groups or by examining institutional responses to dropout at different levels. Also, there are more possibilities for longitudinal studies to examine students' academic pathways over time to see what the longer-term impact of socio-economic restrictions are. This study has flagged the immediate need for reform in Israeli higher education, which is both culturally relevant and equity focused. One cannot have academic success without also addressing the socio-economic conditions under which students' lives are lived.

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