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The Council for Higher Education

Enhancing Access to Higher Education for the Ultra-Orthodox Community – Follow-up Audit



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Background

As of the end of 2022, the ultra-Orthodox community accounted for 12.3% of Israel's population¹. According to projections from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), this figure is expected to rise to 22% (3.2 million people) by 2045 and to 32% (6.4 million) by 2065². Data from CBS for 2024 indicates a low employment rate within the ultra-Orthodox community, particularly among males. By the end of the second quarter of 2024, roughly 53% of ultra-Orthodox men were employed, compared to approximately 87% of Jewish men who were not ultra-Orthodox. In contrast, around 80% of working-age ultra-Orthodox women were employed, while about 83% of non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish women were in the workforce.

Consequently, the average monthly income for ultra-Orthodox families is also lower; As of 2021, the average gross monthly income was approximately NIS 15,000, compared to about NIS 23,000 for secular families. Additionally, data from the National Insurance Institute in 2022 revealed that approximately 12% of families in Israel were ultra-Orthodox, yet this community represented 33.7% of all impoverished families in the country. A viable approach to mitigate poverty and enhance national productivity would include integrating ultra-Orthodox individuals into higher education and the labor market in professions that necessitate advanced educational qualifications. This represents a critical socio-economic objective.

Over the years, the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and its Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) have instituted long-term programs aimed at rendering higher education accessible to the ultra-Orthodox population. These initiatives are designed to facilitate their broader integration into academia and the labor market in a manner conducive to their unique needs and lifestyle. Most of these programs are run on separate campuses for ultra-Orthodox men and women. From 2011 to 2022, approximately NIS 1.7 billion was allocated to two programs aimed at improving access to higher education for the ultra-Orthodox community, with the first program covering the years 2011–2016 and the second from 2017–2022.

1 CBS, "Ultra-Orthodox individuals in Jewish Localities by District and Statistical Area, as of the End of 2022".

2 CBS, "Israel Population Forecast as of February 18, 2019". The rates brought in the present report are according to the moderate alternative out of the three alternatives available in the forecast (low, moderate and high).



Key Figures

**NIS 200
million**

Budget of Planning and Budgeting Committee for making higher education accessible to the ultra-Orthodox society in 2023-2024 (includes NIS 92 million, which is provided to every student studying in institutions of higher education)

Only 17,380

Number of ultra-Orthodox students who studied in institutions of higher education in 2023–2024 compared to the target set by the Council for Higher Education for 2021–2022: 19,000 ultra-Orthodox students (5% of all students in the country, while their share in the general population is about 12%)

81%

Of ultra-Orthodox undergraduate students in 2022–2023 (11,272 out of 13,916) studied in a gender-segregated study setting or at the Open University

**Only
Approximately
69%**

Of ultra-Orthodox men and 82% of ultra-Orthodox women who began studying, completed a bachelor's degree (compared to 77% among men and 85% among women in the rest of the population)

Only 3.2%


Of the ultra-Orthodox graduates in 2021–2022 studied engineering and architecture, compared to 14.3% in the rest of the population (133 compared to 7,229)

**More than
53%**

Of Ultra-Orthodox students who graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2021–2022, studied education and teaching (2,179), while the proportion among non-ultra-Orthodox graduates was only 15%




Audit Actions

 In May 2019, the State Comptroller published an audit report entitled "Enhancing Access to Higher Education for the Ultra-Orthodox Community"³ ('the previous report' or 'the previous audit'). This audit evaluated the Council for Higher Education's initiatives aimed at increasing accessibility to higher education and assessed the monitoring of their effectiveness during the 2011–2018 academic years.

From February to September 2024, the Office of the State Comptroller undertook a follow-up audit to address the primary deficiencies identified in the previous report. This audit focused on several key areas, including the extent to which the target for ultra-Orthodox student enrollment and the percentage of male students was achieved; the dropout rates; prioritization of programs with strong employment prospects; and support for graduates' integration into the workforce. The audit was conducted at the Council for Higher Education- Planning and Budgeting Committee and the Ministry of Labor (Ultra-Orthodox Employment Section), and included inquiries at career guidance centers⁴ as well as various higher education institutions⁵.

Key Findings



 **Eligibility Criteria for Programs** – The Council for Higher Education- Planning and Budgeting Committee has established eligibility criteria for program participation primarily based on the previous educational background of the candidate. This definition is narrower than the criteria established for adequate representation under the Civil Service (Appointments) Law and does not take current lifestyle into account. Applicant educational institutions were afforded the ability to accept non-complying candidates at the rate of an additional 15%, and could request to increase this rate so as to address gaps. However, data indicates that the percentage of ultra-Orthodox students, as defined by the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee, has not significantly increased in recent years, relative to population growth, remaining at approximately 5% of the potential female demographic aged 18 to 40 and about 2% among males. Additionally, around 81% of these students are enrolled in segregated

3 State Comptroller, **Annual Report 69B** (2019), pp. 2013–2061.

4 Bnei Brak and Beit Shemesh.

5 Tel Aviv University, Bar-Ilan University, The Open University, Bnei Brak Ultra-Orthodox College, Ruppin Academic Center, Bezalel Branch, Strauss Campus – Hadassah College, Ono Academic Center, Sami Shimon College, Beit Berl Academic College.



study environments or the Open University. The Council for Higher Education lacks quantitative data on ultra-Orthodox individuals who were not admitted to programs or those for whom courses were not offered due to insufficient student registration as a result of non-compliance with eligibility criteria.

👎 Fulfillment of Ultra-Orthodox Student Enrollment Targets – The previous audit indicated a consistent increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox students; however, the initial target of 14,500 students, set under the initial program, was not met (11,465 enrolled). The follow-up audit showed the deficiency was rectified to a small extent. Despite an ongoing upward trend and steps taken by the Council for Higher Education to enhance enrollment, the subsequent target of 19,000 students in the second program remained unfulfilled (16,430 enrolled). Given the concurrent growth in the ultra-Orthodox population, the percentage of academics among this group has stagnated, with rates in 2023 aligning closely with those recorded in 2019, thus failing to break through the existing "glass ceiling".

👎 Percentage of Men Among all Ultra-Orthodox Students – The previous audit determined that the percentage of ultra-Orthodox men enrolled in higher education institutions was markedly lower than that of women, making up 33% of the total (3,700 out of 11,100 ultra-Orthodox students) in 2016–2017. The follow-up audit showed the deficiency was rectified to a small extent, yet the proportion of ultra-Orthodox male students remained stable at approximately 31% (5,000 out of 16,000). Only in July 2024, five years following the previous audit, did the Council for Higher Education implement an updated budgeting model aimed at providing increased financial support for populations who had not learned core subjects at the high school level, which should incentivize increased male participation.

👎 Degrees in Education Versus Actual Need for Graduates of Education in the Ultra-Orthodox Community and Within the Overall Economy – The previous audit revealed that a significant proportion of ultra-Orthodox students pursued education degrees and teachers training, comprising 29.3% (3,259 out of 11,100) in the years 2016–2017. The follow-up audit showed the deficiency was rectified to a small extent, with 29.9% (4,298 out of 14,351) recorded in 2022–2023, indicating continuity in this trend. However, in 2022, the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee initiated changes to the prioritization of fields of study, aimed at addressing this disparity and promoting diversification in academic tracks.



Dropout Rates – The previous audit indicated that from 2005 to 2014, the dropout rate among ultra-Orthodox students exceeded that of the general population, with a higher rate observed among men. Specifically, 46% of ultra-Orthodox men dropped out compared to approximately 20% of non-ultra-Orthodox men, while around 28% of ultra-




Orthodox women dropped out compared to about 12% of non-ultra-Orthodox women. The follow-up audit showed the deficiency was rectified to a large extent, demonstrating a decrease in dropout rates for both ultra-Orthodox men and women who commenced studies in 2017. The dropout rate for ultra-Orthodox women is now 18% (compared to 15% for non-ultra-Orthodox women), and 31% for ultra-Orthodox men (compared to 23% for non-ultra-Orthodox men). However, a gap in dropout rates relative to the general population persists.






Assistance in Integrating Graduates into Employment and Cooperation with Ultra-Orthodox Employment Programs – The previous audit identified that the programs of the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee lacked provisions for assisting graduates in securing employment and that collaboration with the Ministry of Economy and Industry (now the Ministry of Labor) was insufficient. It was therefore recommended to enhance cooperation between the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee and the Ministry of Labor to bolster operational effectiveness and develop joint programs. The follow-up audit showed the deficiency was rectified to a large extent, with the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee and the Ministry of Labor having formalized their cooperation through the Ministry of Labor’s employment guidance centers

Opening New Study Centers for the Ultra-Orthodox Community – In 2023, the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee initiated efforts to establish new study platforms for the ultra-Orthodox population, including locations in the geographical periphery. This initiative focuses on four areas: Tiberias-Safed, Haifa, Beit Shemesh, and Beer Sheva. Each ultra-Orthodox learning center will feature multiple academic institutions, all coordinated under the administrative leadership of a single institution.

Key Recommendations

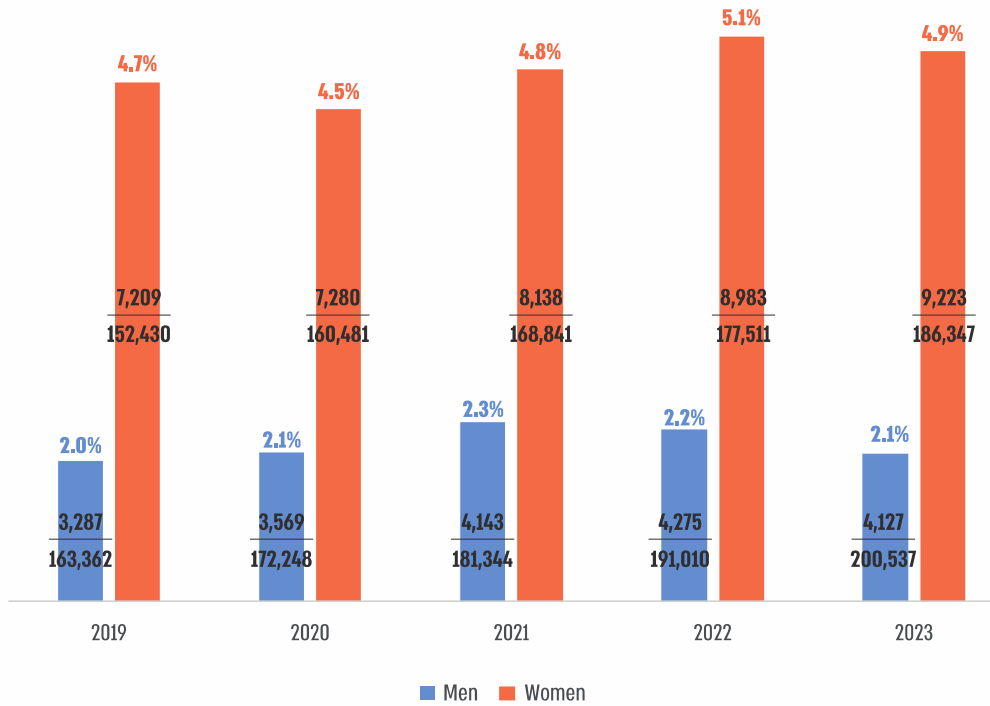
-  It is recommended that the Council for Higher Education collect data regarding ultra-Orthodox candidates who were not accepted for studies under the program, as well as those study programs that were not opened due to candidates not meeting eligibility criteria. This data should be used to periodically review the definition of eligibility and consider potential modifications to better align with the established goals, while examining the complete relevant factual infrastructure. This includes the aforementioned data and an evaluation of the possibility of expanding the eligibility criteria, taking into account the criteria outlined in the Civil Service (Appointments) Law, to better accommodate all ultra-Orthodox candidates interested in participating in programs of the Council for Higher Education- Planning and Budgeting Committee for ultra-Orthodox students, in accordance with all applicable laws.



-  It is recommended that the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee ensure that initiatives aimed at increasing the number of ultra-Orthodox students are effective in achieving the new program's goals.
-  It is recommended that the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee assess the impact of the updated budgeting model on the enrollment rates of ultra-Orthodox male students from the program's inception until 2018, and if necessary, implement additional measures to increase this enrollment rate.
-  It is recommended that the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee persist in efforts to reduce the dropout rate of ultra-Orthodox male and female students, with particular emphasis on males, and to systematically collect data on dropout rates categorized by subject and field of study to better direct its initiatives. Furthermore, it is advisable to update the budgeting model as necessary.
-  It is recommended that the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee consistently assess the effectiveness of the new order of priorities and its impact on the various fields of study, enabling the extraction of valuable insights. Additionally, it is suggested that further measures be implemented, including the development of targeted programs for fields of study that align with labor market demands.
-  It is recommended that the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee and the Ministry of Labor enhance their efforts in guidance and placement services, as well as evaluate the success of their collaborative initiatives.



Percentage of Ultra-Orthodox Students Compared with Potential (Ages 18–40), by Gender, 2019–2023



According to CBS data, processed by the Office of the State Comptroller.



Summary

The integration of the ultra-Orthodox population into higher education and quality employment is a national objective of the State of Israel. Higher education serves as a foundation for integration and success in the labor market, as many economic sectors remain inaccessible to individuals lacking this education. The low labor market participation rate of the ultra-Orthodox population, particularly among men (53% for ultra-Orthodox compared to 87% for non-ultra-Orthodox Jews), adversely affects their economic standing and impedes overall economic growth. Consequently, initiatives aimed at enhancing access to higher education for ultra-Orthodox society, particularly ultra-Orthodox men, are essential due to their notably low rates of employment and academic attainment.

The recent follow-up audit indicates that, despite the efforts of the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee to increase ultra-Orthodox student enrollment in higher education institutions, the proportion of ultra-Orthodox students out of the total ultra-Orthodox population has remained largely unchanged over the past five years, Given the simultaneous growth of the ultra-orthodox population.

Furthermore, the enrollment percentage of ultra-Orthodox men in higher education remains significantly lower than that of women (2% compared to 5%). A substantial proportion of ultra-Orthodox students (approximately 30%) continues to pursue education degrees and teachers training – fields that offer limited employment prospects, while a minority studies engineering and architecture (6.6%) and sciences (10.1%), according to data from 2022–2023.

Since the previous audit, the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee has initiated efforts to address identified deficiencies, including the expansion of programs for ultra-Orthodox students, targeted support to reduce dropout rates, and prioritization of fields of study with improved employment prospects. However, there has yet to be a meaningful change in both the proportion of ultra-Orthodox students from the potential population and the diversity of fields of study.


In light of the findings from the follow-up audit, the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee must regularly evaluate the effectiveness of its actions and decisions to derive lessons for improvement and explore additional strategies to promote higher education within the ultra-Orthodox community, particularly in professions with favorable employment opportunities.



The Extent the Key Deficiencies Noted in the Previous Report were Rectified

The Audit Chapter	The Audited Body	The Deficiency Noted in the Previous Audit	The Extent of Deficiencies Rectification Noted in the Follow-Up Audit			
			Not Rectified	Slightly Rectified	Significantly Rectified	Fully Rectified
Fulfillment of target set for the number of ultra-Orthodox students	Council for Higher Education-Planning and Budgeting Committee	Despite the consistent increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox students studying in institutions of higher education, the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee did not meet the target it set for the first program by the end of the 2015-2016 school year, and in practice their number amounted to 11,465 (about 80% of the target).				




The Audit Chapter	The Audited Body	The Deficiency Noted in the Previous Audit	The Extent of Deficiencies Rectification Noted in the Follow-Up Audit			
			Not Rectified	Slightly Rectified	Significantly Rectified	Fully Rectified
Proportion of men among all ultra-Orthodox students	Council for Higher Education-Planning and Budgeting Committee	The proportion of ultra-Orthodox men in academia is significantly lower than that of ultra-Orthodox women, and the programs did not set a target for increasing the proportion of men among all ultra-Orthodox students. This proportion even decreased during the first program, and the main increase was in the proportion of women studying academic studies.				



The Audit Chapter	The Audited Body	The Deficiency Noted in the Previous Audit	The Extent of Deficiencies Rectification Noted in the Follow-Up Audit			
			Not Rectified	Slightly Rectified	Significantly Rectified	Fully Rectified
Dropout rate	Council for Higher Education-Planning and Budgeting Committee	The dropout rate from academic studies in the ultra-Orthodox sector is more than twice as high as its rate among other sectors: the rate of ultra-Orthodox men dropping out of academic studies reached approximately 46% (compared to approximately 20% among non-ultra-Orthodox men), and among ultra-Orthodox women – approximately 28% (compared to approximately 12% among non-ultra-Orthodox women)				





The Audit Chapter	The Audited Body	The Deficiency Noted in the Previous Audit	The Extent of Deficiencies Rectification Noted in the Follow-Up Audit			
			Not Rectified	Slightly Rectified	Significantly Rectified	Fully Rectified
Pursuit of studies in education within ultra-Orthodox society versus the needs of the education system and the needs of the economy	Council for Higher Education-Planning and Budgeting Committee	In 2016–2017, 29% of all ultra-Orthodox undergraduate students studied education and teachers training. For comparison, among non-ultra-Orthodox students, the rate of those studying education in academic institutions in 2016 was only about 14.5%. In addition, 44% of graduates with first degrees were female graduates in education and teachers training. This is despite the fact that the rate of employment among female graduates in this profession is extremely low and most of them have no employment prospects				



The Audit Chapter	The Audited Body	The Deficiency Noted in the Previous Audit	The Extent of Deficiencies Rectification Noted in the Follow-Up Audit			
			Not Rectified	Slightly Rectified	Significantly Rectified	Fully Rectified
Assistance in integrating graduates into employment and cooperation with ultra-Orthodox employment programs	Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee and the Ministry of Labor	The programs of the Council for Higher Education – Planning and Budgeting Committee did not include assistance in integrating graduates into employment, nor did they cooperate with other parallel programs of the then Ministry of Economy and Industry (or the Ministry of Labor), whose purpose was also to integrate ultra-Orthodox into the employment circle.				