

## The Israeli bar exam as a national parable

by

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The share of Israelis with academic degrees is higher than in the populations of nearly all industrialized countries. But the country's labor productivity is among the lowest in the developed world. This would appear to be a fundamental contradiction – until one understands what happened to us in our race to prosperity.

Israel's national penchant for short cuts has led to an all-out sprint in pursuit of degrees rather than knowledge. It doesn't matter what one studies, nor does the level of the institution or academic department matter. The most important thing is to obtain that coveted piece of paper, the one that opens the door to wealth and happiness – except that this is not how it works.

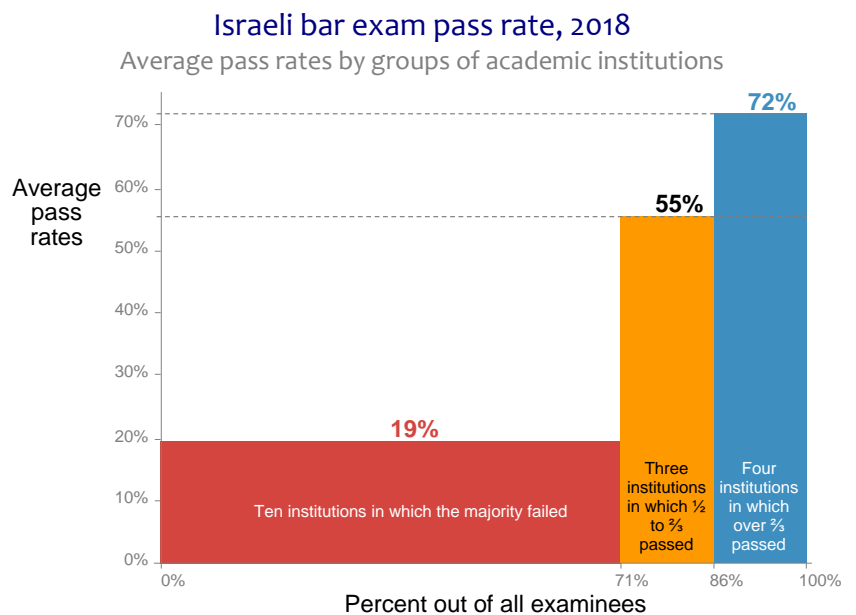
The turmoil begins when graduates in Israel begin looking for work. Private firms in a fiercely competitive global economy don't have any choice other but to distinguish between graduates according to their depth of relevant knowledge. In most disciplines, there are no clear barometers measuring the tremendous knowledge gaps that exist between graduates from different institutions.

But one discipline that does test all of its graduates is law – which provides a national parable for a nation that has lost its way. Each publication of the bar exam results is invariably followed by a plethora of complaints about the exams' seemingly intolerable levels of difficulty, discrimination and more. There is some validity to these grievances, but the arrows are pointed in the wrong directions.

In the most recent example, from this past summer, just 32% of the law graduates taking the bar exam actually passed it. But as is evident in the accompanying graph, the problem is not with the exam but rather, the vast majority of those taking it.

Some 72% of graduates from four institutions, which accounted for 14% of all examinees, passed the exam. And there were three additional institutions where between half and two-thirds of their graduates passed the exams. The problem lies in the ten remaining institutions, from which 71% of the examinees graduated. Over 80% (!) of them failed the bar exam.

How is it possible that there are so many dreadful academic institutions in Israel? The problem begins a long way before academia. Israel's primary and secondary school system is one of the worst in the West, with about half of its pupils receiving a Third World education.



Source: Dan Ben-David, Shoresh Institution and Tel Aviv University  
Data: Israel Bar Association

Most of them have no chance of accessing high quality – or even sufficient – academic studies. These unlucky souls then reach academic institutions, including some very expensive private ones, that market illusions to fill their classrooms.

The solution, at least at the academic level – if not at the primary and secondary ones – is transparency. Israel's Council for Higher Education must require every department in all of its institutions to provide each person requesting application forms with data on the wages and employment of its graduates for each of the three previous years. The country's Central Bureau of Statistics can provide such data independently, which that will compel each institution to improve the quality of its studies so that students will consider applying to it.