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Do We Meet Their Needs? Honors Students' Perspectives and Experiences of Honors Programs

هل نلبي احتياجاتهم؟ وجهات نظر وخبرات الطلاب الموهوبين في برامج الموهوبين في الجامعة

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates university students' perceptions and experiences in the honors program at King Saud University (KSU). A total of twenty gifted university students were interviewed. The findings indicate that the honors program was perceived to be mediocre in content, and students found it to lack challenge and appeal. The participants experienced a lack of engagement with the program at the university compared to the pre-university programs they had experienced in their school years. Students reaffirmed that they benefited more from interactions with others in the program than from their interactions with staff and members of other programs. This study offers an insight into the way these programs are perceived by students and that can be used to enhance them to meet students' needs.

Keywords: Honors programs, King Saud University, Gifted students, Perceptions, Experiences

مستخلص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة النوعية للتعرف على وجهات نظر وخبرات طلاب الموهوبين حول برنامج الموهبة المقدم لهم في جامعة الملك سعود. تكونت عينة المقابلات من 20 طالب وطالبة موهوباً في البرنامج. أشارت النتائج بأن المشاركين يرون بأن محتوى برنامج الموهوبين المقدم لهم في الجامعة ضعيف ويفتقد للتحدي، حيث أظهر المشاركون إن دمجاً ضعيفاً في البرنامج مقارنة بما سبق تقديمه لهم في برامج الموهبة في التعليم العام. كما أظهرت النتائج بأن المشاركين أكدوا على أن التفاعل بينهم وبين زملائهم المنتسبين للبرنامج كان أكثر فائدة من التفاعل مع فريق وأعضاء البرنامج. تحاول الدراسة الحالية تسليط الضوء على وجهات نظر هؤلاء الطلاب حول الطرق الملائمة والتي تساعد على تلبية احتياجاتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: برامج الموهوبين في الجامعات، جامعة الملك سعود، الطلاب الموهوبين، وجهات النظر والخبرات

Do We Meet Their Needs? Honors Students' Perspectives and Experiences of Honors Programs

Today, universities must design honors programs that are effective at developing and cultivating gifted students' abilities and providing them with challenging course content (Rinn, 2019). Previous research has focused on various factors that may affect honors students' participation, but the results have been inconsistent. While some researchers concluded that honors programs have a positive impact on student's academic achievement (Clark et al., 2018; Hartleroad, 2005; Rinn, 2007; Wormington & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2017), increase retention (Kampfe et al., 2016; Keller & Lacy, 2013), and help students adjust, discover their strengths, and develop social skills and a sense of social responsibility (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Hurtado et al., 2007; Young et al., 2016), others found that honors programs failed to meet students' academic goals and did not improve their social skills (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020; Furtwengler, 2015). Spisak and Squires (2016) investigated the relationship between attending honors courses and GPAs. They compared students who participated in more than two honors courses with others who participated in fewer than two honors courses per semester. They concluded that there were no differences in GPA between the two groups. Factors such as involvement, interaction, and program environment and their impact on honors students' intellectual and social interaction development have been studied. It was found that the way that honors students understand the purpose of their involvement in an honors program influences their intellectuality and/or social interaction as well as their experience with honors programs (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Wu et al., 2019). Supportive program environments have impacted students' experiences in their academic careers and prepared them to approach their future goals (Wu et al. 2019). It was also found that a programming environment that encouraged honors students to interact with their professors and peers resulted in protecting them from failure in interaction with others (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020; Hébert & McBee, 2007). The types of enrichment methods used were discovered to

have a significant impact. It was found that extracurricular activities such as lectures, worship, or conferences were beneficial to enhance honors students' confidence, leadership skills, intellectuality, and emotional growth (Gubbels et al., 2014; Vogl & Preckel, 2014).

While these findings provide rich information about the interplay between factors that may impact student participation, little is known about what makes one program more successful than another from the perspective of students. Research into students' perceptions and experiences of honors programs is limited (Helton, 2017). Students' opinions, judgments, and experiences are vital when evaluating program effectiveness (Sussman & Wilson, 2018). Taking students' learning preferences into account may enhance their academic performance and engagement (Young et al., 2016; Wayne et al., 2013). Having a clear understanding of gifted students' experiences can help administrators and staff design appropriate programs that meet their needs (Rinn et al., 2020). The present study adds new knowledge to the field of gifted education. It explores gifted university students' perspectives on and experiences with the Talented Students Program (TSP) at King Saud University (KSU) and attempts to identify issues that may facilitate meeting honors students' needs and expectations.

Gifted Students in Saudi Arabia Universities

Saudi educational policy dated back to 1968 and referred to the importance of identifying and educating gifted students (Alamer, 2010; Alamiri, 2020; Aljughaiman et al., 2016). However, the actual application of this policy became a tangible reality after the Saudi government launched the National Program for the Identification and Education of the Gifted between 1990 and 1995 (Alamer, 2010; Alfaiz et al., 2022). The contribution of these efforts has resulted in the establishment of two institutions for gifted students: the King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity, "*Mawhiba*", established in 1999, followed by the General Department for Gifted Education, established in 2000. This period

has witnessed significant development in gifted education in Saudi Arabia (Alamer, 2010; Alamiri, 2020; Alfaiz et al., 2022; Aljughaiman et al., 2016). According to Alfaiz et al. (2022), in response to this interest in gifted education in Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Education has established about 90 centers for gifted students throughout the kingdom. These centers have served both male and female gifted students throughout the week. Currently, pre-university gifted students have been offered a variety of programs, such as enrichment programs during the school year and summer, self-contained classroom programs, pull-out programs, evening and saturday programs, mentorship programs, and Olympiad and competition programs (Alfaiz et al., 2022). However, not much is known about college-gifted students (Mendaglio, 2013; Rinn & Plucker, 2019). The care and catering of gifted students is a relatively new concept in Saudi colleges when compared to gifted programs in their earlier years. Despite several Saudi universities announcing the commencement of unique gifted programs, these programs are lacking in terms of meeting these gifted students' needs (Abunasser & AlAli, 2022; Alamer, 2023). This lack can be attributed to the inability to identify and organize gifted students and their requirements, as well as not having the right material to guide these students and their abilities (Abunasser & AlAli, 2022). KSU's gifted student program is a new six-year program (Alamer, 2023). The program serves two types of students at KSU: academically excellent students and gifted students. They are both served by the Distinguished and Talented Students Program (DTSP) at the university. Each program has its own objectives and enrichment plan. Since the aim of this study focused on the Talented Students Program (TSP), the author described the TSP only. The TSP was established in 2016. It consisted of two phases: the first is when students start their studies in the common first year (the preparatory stage), and, the second is when they join their colleges. The TSP at the first phase identified gifted students through some criteria that include: a) direct nomination for students who were already identified as gifted based on King Abdulaziz and His Compainons Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity standardization, "*Mawhiba*", a 750 score or

above; b) an internal announcement to all students who have or feel they may have a potential for giftedness; c) interviewing those students to assure their abilities and capabilities for the program. All students who completed phase one are directly eligible to join the program in phase two. The TSP offers students four fields: the scientific field, the visual and performing arts field, the humanitarian field, and the innovation field. The students are invited to join a variety of activities within the program. They include workshops, practical teaching, visits to local and international organizations, and centers for the gifted. In addition, honors students are offered special preparation for required tests to allow them to pass required admissions tests to well-known schools. The TSP's staff coordinates with the concerned units and departments at the university to provide the students with all required tools and resources, as well as adapt a policy for registering and allowing the students to attend the program's activities and events inside and outside the university. The students are permitted to be absent for up to ten lectures during their participation, and they are also rewarded for exceptional contributions.

The Current Study

Since the Distinguished and Talented Students Program (DTSP) serves two types of students, the scope of this paper focuses only on the TSP. Terms such as gifted, honors, or talented were used interchangeably to refer to TSP. Another group that is served by the program, called distinguished students, did not participate in the current study. However, terms such as distinguished, highly academic, or excellent students that identify this group have been mentioned in some sections of the current study. It may help to clarify that the purpose behind mentioning them was because they were stated by the TSP group during interview sessions or in the results sections. The current study is part of a larger project designed to understand the perspectives of gifted university students at KSU concerning the TSP during their studies at university colleges. It was conducted by interviewing college gifted students who were enrolled in this program to

investigate their perceptions of and experiences with the TSP. Specifically, it attempted to answer the following main research question: *Does the Talented Students Program (TSP) at King Saud University meet gifted students' needs?*

Methods

The author employed a qualitative descriptive design (Kahlke, 2014). Although the qualitative method has many approaches that can be used to guide and interpret participants' opinions and experiences, a qualitative descriptive approach is suitable when researchers are interested in exploring and understanding how individuals describe and articulate their perceptions and experiences in a simplistic and meaningful way (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). The author conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the participants. This method gives the interviewees more flexibility to remember and explain their thoughts and experiences, increasing the validity of the findings (Murphy et al., 2019). It also allows the interviewer to observe and pick up interesting words or phrases that emerge during the session (Beail & Williams 2014).

Participants

After obtaining an approval letter from the Ethics Committee of KSU, the author contacted the department of the Distinguished and Talented Students Program (DTSP) to explain the study's purpose and sample selection process. Since the nature of the study attempts to target specific individuals, a purposeful sampling technique was used to select the participants. Purposeful sampling is an appropriate method for identifying specific participants' characteristics that provide relative information about the study goal and the research questions (Patton, 2002). In addition, it is an appropriate method to give researchers comprehensive details about the issue under investigation. The procedure used to target the current study's participants listed four conditions as the following: they (a) were enrolled in the TSP since they entered the university and have continued participation during the university colleges; they (b) have had two semesters or less

before graduating only from their colleges; they (c) withdrew from the program at the university colleges; and they (d) represented all giftedness fields that have been specified in the TSP (literary talent, scientific talent, innovation talent, and art talent). Fifty students who met these conditions were emailed a letter explaining the study objectives and an invitation to join the interview sessions. The prospective respondents were clearly informed that their participation is voluntary, and they have every right to join and share their views or otherwise ignore this invitation. However, the author highlighted the importance of their participation in such research that is basically designed and conducted for them. After posting two friendly reminders, 20 students with a 40% response rate expressed an interest in participating in the interviews. Table 1 shows the selected participants and their background information.

Table 1*Demographic information about the participants*

Participant	Sex	Age	Status	Talent fields	Talent description
Student1	Male	22	Continuing	Literary talent	Poetry writing and rhetoric genius
Student2	Male	23	Continuing		
Student3	Female	22	Continuing		
Student4	Female	21	Withdrawn		
Student5	Female	22	Withdrawn		
Student6	Male	23	Withdrawn	Scientific talent	Mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry, medicine, etc...
Student7	Male	22	Withdrawn		
Student8	Male	22	Withdrawn		
Student9	Female	21	Continuing		
Student10	Female	22	Continuing		
Student11	Male	20	Continuing	Innovation talent	Creativity, inventions, robots, etc...
Student12	Male	21	Continuing		
Student13	Female	22	Continuing		
Student14	Female	23	Withdrawn		
Student15	Female	22	Withdrawn		
Student16	Male	21	Withdrawn	Art talent	Drawing, designing, carving, photographing, etc...
Student17	Male	23	Withdrawn		
Student18	Male	22	Withdrawn		
Student19	Female	23	Continuing		
Student20	Female	21	Continuing		

Instruments and Data Procedures

A semi-structured interview was used in this study. This method is appropriate when authors are interested in collecting data that is “a reasonably accurate representation of what your participants think, feel, and have experienced” (Fylan, 2005, p. 65). To develop the interview research questions, a systematic review of the literature was done. It included international literature that highlights the paucity of empirical research on issues related to honors/college gifted programs, such as the effectiveness of honors programs, as well as literature on gifted students' perceptions/experiences, attitudes, and evolutions regarding these programs (Duncheon, 2020). In addition, the construction of interview questions considered the recent national demand by a few Saudi researchers who stressed the importance of establishing educational policy and strategies for identifying, caring for, and teaching college gifted students in Saudi Arabian universities (Abunasser & AlAli, 2022). In developing the interview questions, I mainly focused on how students describe their perceptions and experiences of the honors program in meeting their talent needs. The interview questions were formulated to evaluate the students' perceptions of their involvement and describe the advantages/disadvantages that they have experienced within the gifted university program. A list of raw interview research questions was added to the study protocols to arrange and extract themes related to the study's objectives and research questions. To ensure that the interview protocol aligns with the study's objective and the research questions (Elo et al., 2014), the protocol was reviewed by two colleagues who are familiar with the topic and have expertise in conducting qualitative research. This technique would help to improve understanding of the issue (Bengtsson, 2016) and identify any hidden themes that may deserve examination (Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016). All interviews were conducted by the author. Prior to each interview, the author explained the purpose of the study and informed students of

their right to participate or decline the offer. The author guaranteed all students that the information they provided would only be used for research purposes. The individual interviews were conducted over the phone at a time of the student's choosing to ensure that they felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences. The interviews ranged from 35 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the participant's consent. The protocol adapted for the interview questions was semi-structured. The interview questions were developed based on an extensive review of the issues related to honors students' perspectives on and experiences with honors programs. The questions were written to allow the students to explain all the advantages and disadvantages they experienced within the program. They included participants' backgrounds, demographic characteristics, areas of talent, descriptions of the program recruitment process, and perceptions toward gifted programs in the first and second phases. To cultivate students' responses and ensure a greater level of information, additional interview questions were discussed. *What is your perception of the university's gifted program? Can you explain the program environment you experienced (i.e., interactions, freedom, independence, learning strategies, type of activities, and the outcome)? Do subjects or activities you already attended in phase 1 differ from others you have taken in phase 2?*

Procedures and Analysis

A thematic approach strategy was used to arrange and examine the transcribed interview data in an analytically meaningful presentation that facilitated coding, developed themes, and created a link between findings and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). All the transcribed interview data was first listed in Microsoft Word to highlight, write notes, and create memos. This initial procedure allowed the author to summarize the condensed data and enhanced the author's understanding of the

relationship between the participants' responses and the research questions. Next, coding was applied by segmenting and highlighting similar words, phrases, or descriptions expressed by the participants. Identified codes were used to construct larger themes and to connect them based on similar responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The author then discussed the analysis procedure with two colleagues, both of whom are PhD holders and have extensive experience in research. The identified codes and themes were submitted to them with a brief description of the study's context and a list of research questions. They were requested to review the interview protocols as well as check that the identified codes and themes represent the interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

To assess the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis, the author conducted several criteria for this purpose. To ensure transferability, it was carefully planned to identify and target the most appropriate participants who had relevant information and familiarity with the investigated issue. In addition, the author emailed the participants an invitation letter that included an introduction to the study's purpose and the process of data collection; this information has been repeated at the beginning of each interview. All the participants' responses during the interview session were recorded and immediately summarized on a separate sheet. To avoid any misunderstanding of the interviewees' responses and to increase their validity, the author used two techniques. Firstly, each interviewee's responses were reviewed at the end of the interview to ensure that their interviewee's responses were correctly recorded (Elo et al., 2014). Secondly, to increase the accuracy of the participants' responses, all interview transcripts were emailed to all participants with a request to review their responses and whether they were consistent with their opinions (Guest et al., 2020). Concerning credibility, it was promoted through a discussion between the author and his colleagues. They were requested to go through the data to identify any code or theme

that was not covered in the research question. This procedure serves to revise the transcript as well as augment credibility (Noble & Smith, 2015).

To ensure dependability and confirmability, the author of this study tried throughout all interview sessions not to interrupt the interviewees and give them the chance to describe their experiences and perspectives. He wrote all the inferences, notes, and observations on a separate sheet for review later. The two colleagues and the author reviewed all interview transcripts and all comments that were already outlined, including notes, observations, and personal interpretations, to ensure that all responses and descriptions provided by the participants supported the study's findings (Noble & Smith, 2015), as well as that the identified codes and themes represented the interview data correctly and were not affected by the interviewer's preconceptions (Connelly, 2016). In addition to these themes, the author encouraged participants to provide suggestions to improve the program. This request serves as an indirect expression intended to infer hidden experiences and opinions of the participants toward the program.

Findings

The thematic analysis resulted in three main themes that illustrate the participants' perspectives and experiences within the TSP of gifted students at KSU. These themes were: (a) the effectiveness of the program; (b) involvement; and (c) enrichment methods. Each of these three main themes included sub-themes that emerged from the analysis and were then linked to the relevant theme. For example, under the first main theme, *the effectiveness of the program*, the participants mentioned administrative and financial issues, whereas, under the second main theme, *involvement*, the students discussed issues related to their participation, engagement, and program environment. In addition, students argued about the methods used to enrich them during the program's workshops and activities. In the analysis, the participants have been divided into two groups: withdrawn

students (who withdrew from the TSP at the university colleges) and continuing students (who have continued participation since they entered the university). To present and interpret these themes, direct quotes from students' perspectives and experiences, as well as summarizing and paraphrasing some selected portions of students' discussions regarding the program, were used in the following section.

The effectiveness of the program

As most of the students who participated in this study had already joined pre-university programs for gifted students during their general education period, they were asked to describe their experiences at this time compared with the TSP during their college years. They argued that pre-university programs were more organized and supportive compared to college programs. However, all students stressed the importance of the university program as an opportunity that may help them practice and improve their talents at university. They all assured me of the necessity of the availability of such a program at the higher education stage. They all agreed upon a quote that was mentioned by one student: "As a gifted person, I need an environment that allows me to test my ability to understand my weaknesses and strengths" (continuing gifted student, Individual interview, July 6, 2021). Moreover, all students reported that paying attention to gifted students at the higher education stage not only benefits students but also gives universities an opportunity to gain more advantages financially and/or academically. A withdrawn gifted student reported that "the university may benefit from caring for their gifted students, which betters its reputation academically and its resources financially" (Individual interview, July 8, 2021). Another continuing gifted student stated that "paying attention to gifted students may result in mentioning university affiliation through gifted students' publications and/or patents, which increases the university's academic reputation and its

opportunities in establishing partnerships with the private and public sectors” (Individual interview, July 9, 2021). Theoretically, the above quotes explained that all participants conveyed positive feelings regarding the idea of an established gifted program; however, subsequent discussions showed that the participants had a degree of concern about the effectiveness of their program. These can be summarized in the two following sub-themes: administrative and financial issues.

Administrative: All participants agreed upon the lack of plans and arrangements in the TSP, especially during phase two. One withdrawn gifted student reported that “there is no clear connection between the program staff and students... we do not even know the coordinator’s name at our college” (Individual interview, July 12, 2021). A continuing student claimed that “I have joined the program since I entered university, and I have not met the coordinator so far” (Individual interview, July 9, 2021). This issue was also stressed by another withdrawn gifted student: “In phase one, I had somewhat been notified about activities or workshops; however, in phase two, I knew nothing about such events” (Individual interview, July 15, 2021). The students also experienced inaccuracy in either activity/workshop time or their chosen topics. One withdrawn gifted student reported that “I rarely received a notification about activities; however, if I was lucky to receive one, the event was canceled” (Individual interview, July 17, 2021). In addition, a continuing gifted student claimed that “I had the invitation to participate in a workshop in my area of interest. However, all I found was unrelated to my needs” (Individual interview, July 12, 2021).

Financial issues: Financial support was mentioned throughout the participants’ responses. Most students argued that the TSP has insufficient funds to arrange some required workshops or activities. One withdrawn gifted student reported that “most events that I participated in were normal and presented usually by students or staff themselves” (Individual interview, July 6, 2021). Another withdrawn gifted student stressed this claim and

reported that “when discussing our needs to have experts who were closer to our interests, the staff justified that inviting external experts required a payment that is unavailable (Individual interview, July 22, 2021). Another continuing gifted student argued that “I introduced my project to one of the staff programs that needed some financial aid, but unfortunately this request was not supported” (Individual interview, July 17, 2021). Although the TSP guidelines clearly mentioned the availability of financial support, most students argued that there was an inconsistency between the official statements of and from the program and the reality of it.

Involvement

The participants experienced ambivalent perspectives about their roles, engagements, and participation in the programs. For some participants, this involvement was somewhat present during phase one, whereas they reported a lack of interest in such involvement during phase two. One withdrawn gifted student described his experience during the program. He explained that “... I felt closer to the program during phase one. Meeting other students who shared my interests pushed me to be more enthusiastic and motivated. However, I felt isolated and neglected during my participation in the program during the second phase” (Individual interview, July 21, 2021). It was also reported by the continuing gifted student that “in phase one there was a possibility to find some workshops/activities that may encourage me to get involved. After three years of being a member of the program, I have felt uninterested in getting more involved in the program in phase two” (Individual interview, July 9, 2021). As the aim of the study was to investigate the students' experiences during the program, the author attempted to understand the factors that may have led to this conclusion. To reach this, three elements were considered. These were interactions, engagements, and environments.

Interactions and participation: The interview questions included inquiries about the student's interactions and participation. Most students argued that there was a level of participation and interaction in phase one, while this opportunity was not available after the first year. A continuing gifted student reported that "I cannot precisely evaluate my participation because the program is inactive now... The last event I attended was four months ago" (Individual interview, July 20, 2021). Also, a withdrawn gifted student revealed that "In phase one, I had a chance to participate more and discuss issues with peers. In phase two, I felt a bit isolated as there were occasional announcements of events or workshops" (Individual interview, July 16, 2021).

In spite of this negative statement, the author encouraged students to describe their experiences during the activities they participated in. Their responses showed that they had significant interactions with their peers compared to program staff or presenters. One continuing gifted student described her experience as wonderful when it came to communicating with peers. She reported that: "I gained a lot of knowledge and information about my interest when chatting/discussing some issues related to it with other friends. I was stuck on an idea for some time, but discussing it with my friends helped me find a solution" (Individual interview, July 9, 2021).

Another continuing gifted student revealed that "interaction with peers is very helpful. As a brand-new student at university who lives with a different experience, I am very lucky to meet a mate on my giftedness track. He is very supportive! He always encourages me to get more involved" (Individual interview, July 17, 2021).

Interestingly, most students talked about outdoor activities/camping and their impact on their lives. One continuing gifted student talked about the influence that gathering or meeting with other students had on his experience. He reported that, "I had joined an outdoor trip arranged by the

program. I have met many students that have different perspectives than me, as they come from different giftedness tracks in the program. However, I got involved with them quickly! I spent a significant amount of time interacting with one friend about some philosophical questions and our roles in this life. I received many constructive answers. I will never forget how positive I felt" (Individual interview, July 12, 2021).

When it came to the participants' experiences related to the interactions with presenters and the program staff, most students reported different experiences. While some students appreciated the interaction with presenters as they gave them an opportunity to ask questions, other students reported that these presenters often provided inadequate information about students' passions and interests. A continuing gifted student described his experience by reporting that, "during the event, my colleagues and I asked the presenters many questions that occurred based on our interests. The one thing that we highly appreciated was that the presenters gave us time to explain our inquiries and expressions". Other students argued that allowing students to mention or elaborate on their questions is meaningless if these students do not receive the required information. One withdrawn gifted student claimed that, At the early stage of my joining the program, I used to post many questions to the presenters with the hope of finding an answer. Although they gave me the chance to ask, they usually replied with inadequate answers to these questions (Individual interview, July 9, 2021).

Most students agreed with the fact that the TSP staff were friendly. However, they lack knowledge and experience of gifted students' needs. It is not surprising, as most staff who work in the program have more experience dealing with academically excellent students compared to the gifted. One withdrawn gifted student reported that "most activities and workshops I attended were appropriate for ordinary students" (Individual interview, July 9, 2021). Another continuing gifted student reported that

“staff usually encourage us to contact other gifted students when discussing issues related to giftedness” (Individual interview, July 16, 2021).

Environment and Engagement

To understand the impact of the TSP's environment on students' academic success, engagement, and adaptation, students were asked to describe their opinions and experiences about these issues. All students agreed on the fact that the TSP in phase one was more competitive compared with phase two. Some students attributed their academic success during the first year to the benefits they gained from the TSP. One continuing gifted student reported that “I was lucky to join the program... it helped me so much to cope with my studies, and I got good marks” (Individual interview, July 9, 2021). Another continuing gifted student stressed this statement and said, “I used to feel more engaged in the program in phase one. It gave me advantages to interact with my classmates, which resulted in increasing my understanding of college subjects” (Individual interview, July 9, 2021). In contrast, most students stated that the program during phase two did not impact their academic success. One withdrawn gifted student said that “I have not felt any impact of joining the program on my studies” (Individual interview, July 16, 2021).

Regarding the influence of the environment of the program on their engagements or adaptations, all students agreed on the fact that the TSP at the early stage of joining had an attractive environment, whereas this feeling disappeared during the second stage. One withdrawn gifted student stated that “I was a bit worried when I entered university as I was living in a new environment that I knew nothing about. However, meeting friends during activities reduced this worry and pushed me to be more engaging” (Individual interview, July 16, 2021).

To identify the reasons that may affect the students' perspectives on the TSP environment later, the author requested the students to outline in

detail these causes. They mentioned three reasons: bias, encouragement, and weak participation. Due to the fact that the DTSP has two branches, one for academic students and one for gifted students, most students who were nominated as gifted had some disagreements about equity. Other students profoundly expressed their disappointment about the decision that has been taken by the program staff to select students for representing the program locally and/or internationally, such as "During my time in the program, I have not known any gifted students nominated to participate in local or international events" (Withdrawn gifted students, Individual interview, July 20, 2021). Another withdrawn gifted student argued that "the program staff has paid more attention to academically inclined students compared with gifted students (Individual interview, July 9, 2021). Moreover, this extends to the ratio of workshops and activities. One continuing gifted student described his engagement and said that "Most events I attended were more suitable for academically excellent students... I seldom found workshops or lectures of my interest" (Individual interview, July 20, 2021). Also, the participants experienced a lack of encouragement from the program department. One withdrawn gifted student argued that "While the program description clearly mentioned financial rewards for outstanding students, these rewards were allocated only to academically gifted students" (Individual interview, July 9, 2021).

The quotes above demonstrate instances in which gifted students stressed that the program department did not give them the interest and attention they deserved. In addition, the gifted students have not received adequate encouragement to push them to be engaged with the program.

Enrichment Methods

The TSP guideline outlines several methods to enrich students during their participation, which include workshops, lectures, lab sessions, and visiting programs. It is planned that these activities serve to develop and

enhance students' potential to meet their talents and needs. Most coded responses in this category were about the quality of enrichment procedures used in the program. All students who attended these activities stated that the contents and strategies used were normal. A continuing gifted student argued that "all workshops or lectures I already attended throughout the program did not challenge me" (Individual interview, July 16, 2021). A withdrawn gifted student agreed with this statement and reported that "the enrichment procedures did not challenge our intellectuality nor interests" (Individual interview, July 16, 2021). Several participants in this study often found that they had to improve their talent themselves as the program enrichment gave them the minimum knowledge needed. One withdrawn gifted student described her experience and stated that, "I looked forward to attending a session that answered many questions in my head. I was extremely optimistic when I joined the program and said to myself, 'it is time now to catch your goal'... Unfortunately, it did not happen... nothing met my desires. All I found was to attend a workshop or lecture, which never piqued my passion" (Individual interview, July 16, 2021).

Another continuing gifted student described his experience and said, "I was required to participate in an event; it was about poetry and novels or something like that... with all my respect to this event, but it was not part of my interest! I wish I had said, "Excuse me, I am not interested in such a subject; I am interested in innovation issues, and I still had dozens of unanswered questions... allow me to leave" (Individual interview, July 16, 2021).

Most participants argued about extracurricular content. They perceived that most activities and/or enrichment sessions were not suitable for all gifted students. In other words, some areas such as medicine or engineering receive less attention compared to other areas such as the arts and scientific subjects (i.e., poetry, design, mathematics, and computer science). Although the current study did not aim to investigate the differences between gifted students' tracks, some students who were

interested in medicine or engineering felt neglected in the program. They described their dissatisfaction with participating in the program was neglect. One withdrawn gifted student argued that "I am interested in medical equipment as well as dental tools. I never found any support from the program department or the extracurricular learning" (Individual interview, July 9, 2021). Another continuing gifted student claimed that "students who were interested in engineering issues had nothing in this program" (Individual interview, July 9, 2021).

Identifying such a case urged the author to understand the justifications that force some students to stay in the program or drop out. One withdrawn gifted student argued that "I joined the program when I entered university, phase one. I left the program in my second year of college. There were no activities or support, so I decided to leave and cultivate my time and energy in my academic career" (Individual interview, July 22, 2021).

Another withdrawn gifted student reported a similar statement. He said that "it is a waste to join a program that has ordinary challenges. I believe most gifted students are capable of searching and developing their talent much better than what they offer in such activities" (Individual interview, July 20, 2021). In general, it is not surprising that students who withdraw from the program may mention such reasons. However, it was interesting to understand other students' opinions who reported their disaffection from the program while still remaining in it. They attributed this to personal reasons such as eligibility for a participation certificate and expanding their friendship network. For example, one continuing gifted student said, "I joined the program when entering the university. I have established my friendship group, allowing me to exchange ideas and issues related to our study. So, I decided to stay, though I did not get much from the program" (Individual interview, July 22, 2021).

In addition, other students who have a certificate that proves they were nominated as one of the university's gifted students may support their future opportunities. A continuing gifted student explained that "I was rarely invited to program activities or sessions; however, taking a decision to leave the program may not be a wise idea. If I did not find a chance to improve my talent in the program, let me at least gain the program certificate and use it as a reference to support and expand my future options" (Individual interview, July 22, 2021).

Findings prove that the participants have many similarities regarding their experience with the program. Interestingly, both withdrawn and continuing students expressed dissatisfaction with the TSP. Withdrawn students refrained from staying within the TSP because they are hypothetically more focused on the intellectual benefit while continuing students may share this drive but find themselves more willing to bear the lack of fulfillment and support to gain the TSP's certificate. These findings lead us to believe that the rope that ties students to the TSP is mostly unrelated to the TSP's content and activities. Some students gave significant suggestions to improve and develop the program, such as considering the program plan and budget and paying more attention to specific talents and fields like engineering, medicine, and entrepreneurship. Students also suggested that the courses become more interactive and specifically tailored to students' needs. Staff and teachers should also be well informed about modern studies to strengthen their relationships with their students. Students must feel supported and have a safe place to present their ideas.

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine university-gifted students' experiences and perspectives within TSP at KSU. Limitations of the current paper should be considered when evaluating the results. First, using only qualitative methods limits the ability to generalize the findings of the current

study. Second, time constraints, as the author was involved in other works while conducting the current study, may minimize the opportunity to elaborate on the students' perspectives.

Most of the participants had already participated in gifted education programs that were conducted by public and private schools. All students perceived gifted education programs during their studies in elementary or secondary schools as more useful and effective than the TSP at universities. It was not surprising to receive such opinions, as considerable research and theories already exist for students in schools (Mendaglio, 2013; Rinn & Plucker, 2004, 2019). This previous experience may affect their perception of their TSP. The current study and findings have further emphasized the importance of gifted programs in the eyes of gifted students. These students believe that the availability of these specific programs that cater to their gifted needs in their academic years is pertinent for them to flourish in their academic lives (Clark et al., 2018; Hartleroad, 2005; Rinn & Plucker, 2019). Despite that belief, the students have not experienced a positive experience in this TSP, especially in their second phase, as they showed a lower satisfaction level compared to phase one (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020; Furtwengler, 2015; Seifert et al., 2007). Findings state that they believe that the TSP lacks organization and financial support (Abunasser & AlAli, 2022; Alamer, 2023). They find this lack of specialty one of the reasons for their lack of fulfillment when it comes to their support. This result aligns with studies that have stated that such programs lack certain crucial components to ascertain the full usage and benefit of gifted programs as proposed by previous studies (Abunasser & AlAli, 2022; Alamer, 2023; Helton, 2017).

Regarding the students' involvement within the TSP, the students found that despite their presence and overall attendance in gifted student programs, they still felt that their involvement was very little. Programs that are not interactive eventually lead to a bored and unfulfilled audience (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Wu et al., 2019). The participants stated that their

phase one experience was more interactive than their phase two experience because they were more involved in the TSP. This result may be in line with previous studies that found honors students often have positive perceptions of honors programs at an early stage (Seifert et al., 2007). To enhance and cultivate a more fulfilling environment, we must focus on interaction and its many types. We can summarize these interactions to include peers, presenters, and staff, where maintaining a healthy interactive relationship with them ensures a well-balanced experience.

Positive interaction between students and/or faculty members and administrators is very helpful to encourage students to be more engaged within the program, as has been highlighted in other studies (Almukhambetova & Hernández-Torrano, 2020; Cabrera et al., 2002; Hébert & McBee, 2007; Webber et al., 2013). The students have stated that their interactions with their peers within the TSP are one of the prime reasons for their entertainment and commitment to the program. Their peers were able to help and impact their lives positively through their indoor and outdoor interactions. While students experienced positive interactions with their peers, they noted the opposite when it came to presenters. They found their interactions with their presenters lacking. This could be attributed to many things, like a lack of captivation and interest, a lack of information provided, a lack of variety when it comes to activities, and a general lack of enthusiasm that hinders the students' passion. Teachers should attend extensive workshops and courses on how to handle gifted students and how to fulfill their needs. The above also applies to the program's administrators. Students have stated that their interactions with the staff were friendly; however, they lack knowledge of giftedness.

Enrichment methods are also vital in ensuring that students not only remain in the TSP but also enjoy their stay (Young et al., 2016). Students mentioned that the quality and content of extracurricular activities as well as the general content/sessions of these programs did not cater to their interests because they were not diverse. The TSP happened to focus more

on the arts and sciences but neglected engineering and medicine, for instance. Extracurricular activities not only help talented students meet others and build their own friendship network (Gubbels et al., 2014; Hébert & McBee, 2007; Vogl & Preckel, 2014), but also develop their leadership skills and confidence (Wu et al., 2019).

Conclusion and future suggestions

The current study aims to understand honors students' perspectives and experiences within TSP at KSU. Previous studies indicate that honors programs positively impact honors students' academic and social communication skills, adjustment, and future opportunities; however, we know little about the type of enrichment they prefer within such programs from their own perspectives. The findings of this study prove the importance of establishing an honors program in university settings. Findings showed that some factors, including administration and financial support, played a key role in judging the TSP's effectiveness. Higher education administrators who work with honors students must improve their understanding and knowledge of gifted students' characteristics. It was found that establishing honors programs for undergraduate success is not enough unless we consider the unique needs of gifted students. With all these inputs in mind, it is important for the author and future research to address these issues by asking the people that are affected most in this, the gifted students. Much research has helped us in building a better environment and curriculum for our special students. There is no reason for any form of improvement to stop. The author believes that students who stay in honors student programs must stay there because they enjoy it, not because of the certificates it offers. Pinpointing the key factors that indulge the minds of these gifted students and enhancing them could be a major step ahead in further allowing their gifts to flourish and better themselves and society. In sum, future studies should expand our understanding of the ways honors students prefer to interact, engage, and participate in such programs.

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