

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo. 17939199

PIONEERING HONORS EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ITS VALUE AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Received: 02/11/2025

Accepted: 15/11/2025

ABSTRACT

Honors education provides academically gifted students with specialized coursework aimed at fostering critical thinking, leadership, and professional development. This study examines student perceptions of specialized honors courses at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, focusing on their perceived value, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 11 students from the inaugural 2022 cohort who had completed three specialized honors courses: Teacher Leadership, Innovative Teaching Methods, and Digital Skills for Teachers. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes related to student experiences and recommendations. Students reported significant academic and professional benefits, including knowledge expansion, leadership development, and career preparedness. However, challenges such as scheduling conflicts, insufficient networking opportunities, and a lack of structured mentorship were identified. Participants suggested improving curriculum integration, expanding career guidance, increasing networking activities, and incorporating more practical learning opportunities to enhance the honors experience. The findings highlight the need for continuous refinement of honors programs to better align with student needs and career aspirations. Strengthening mentorship structures, increasing interdisciplinary opportunities, and improving logistical support can enhance the effectiveness of honors education. These insights contribute to ongoing discussions on improving specialized academic programs for high-achieving students. While based on a small, qualitative sample, the study offers rich, in-depth insights into student experiences. Future research could extend these findings by engaging broader student cohorts and incorporating quantitative approaches.

KEYWORDS: Honors Education, Student Perceptions, Leadership Development, Student Engagement, Experiential Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Honors education has long been recognized as a vital component of higher education, offering academically gifted students opportunities to engage in intellectually stimulating and challenging coursework. Specialized honors courses are designed to foster critical thinking, creativity, and advanced scholarship, often featuring smaller class sizes, innovative teaching approaches, and enriched academic content. These courses not only aim to deepen students' understanding of their chosen fields but also prepare them for leadership roles and lifelong learning. Despite their benefits, the design and implementation of specialized honors courses often come with unique challenges, including resource constraints, varying faculty expertise, and disparities in student preparedness.

The establishment of Honors College at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University in Almaty, Kazakhstan, represented a major advancement in creating specialized programs for a handpicked group of 100 students. It is the very first such program in Kazakhstan. Admission to the program was competitive, involving evaluations based on GPA, interviews, and standardized test results, with the inaugural cohort joining in 2022. The program provides a holistic educational experience that transcends conventional classroom instruction, aiming to equip students with advanced pedagogical competencies. These include leadership skills, collaborative abilities, innovative teaching techniques, and intensive digital training tailored for future teachers. To achieve these objectives, the program developers have crafted specialized courses exclusively for Honors students.

Prior studies have indicated that while students generally appreciate the intellectual rigor and unique opportunities offered by honors courses, they also encounter challenges such as heavy workloads, perceived inequities in grading, and difficulties balancing honors and non-honors commitments. While honors education has been widely studied in Western contexts, there is a significant gap in the literature on how such programs are perceived and experienced in post-Soviet higher education systems, particularly in Kazakhstan where the concept of honors education is still emerging. Given the novelty and the dearth of honors education in such contexts, there is limited empirical evidence on how students evaluate its value, relevance, and alignment with their academic and professional aspirations. Without such insights, program developers and

policymakers may miss opportunities to refine the structure, address potential barriers, and maximize the transformative potential of this pioneering initiative.

The objective of the study therefore is to explore student perceptions of specialized honors courses in depth, with a focus on understanding the perceived value, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. By identifying specific areas of concern and opportunities for enhancement, this research aims to contribute to the development of more effective and inclusive honors education practices. Understanding student perceptions of specialized honors courses is essential for evaluating their effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement. Prior research suggests that while honors education enhances academic engagement and professional readiness, students may also face challenges related to workload, mentorship, and integration with broader academic programs (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Seifert et al., 2007). Given the novelty of Honors College at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, this exploratory study seeks to explore student experiences in depth. **Specifically, the following research questions guided this study**

1. How do students perceive the academic and personal benefits of participating in the Abai Honors College?
2. How do students describe the challenges they have experienced in the program?
3. In what ways do students believe the Honors College could be improved to better meet their needs and goals?

Understanding student perceptions of specialized honors courses is critical for improving their quality and relevance. Students' views provide valuable insights into the efficacy of course design, the alignment between course objectives and student expectations, and the barriers that may hinder learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Honors programs provide enriched academic opportunities for high-achieving students through rigorous and innovative curricula. Specialized honors courses, a central component of these programs, are designed to challenge students and foster intellectual growth. This literature review explores the perceived value, challenges, and potential improvements of honors courses, focusing on student perspectives. Specialized honors courses are often perceived as highly valuable due to their focus on critical thinking, creativity, and intellectual engagement. According to Seifert et al. (2007), these

courses enhance students' intellectual development through small class sizes, fostering close interactions with faculty and peers. Hébert and McBee (2007) emphasize the transformative nature of honors courses, highlighting how they encourage interdisciplinary learning and stimulate discussions that challenge conventional perspectives. This aligns with Siegle et al. (2013), who found that students in honors settings consistently credit rigorous, discussion-based learning for shaping their intellectual identity.

Honors courses also prepare students for academic and professional success. Students associate these courses with better preparation for graduate studies and competitive job markets. The incorporation of experiential learning opportunities, such as research projects and global experiences, further enhances the perceived value of honors courses. Kinzie and Kuh's work on experiential learning is echoed in Martins and Goss (2023), who showed that thesis-preparation courses in honors programs significantly improve students' research literacy and self-confidence.

Honors courses are specifically designed to provide an enhanced academic experience, often characterized by increased rigor and intellectual depth. These courses encourage students to engage with complex ideas and materials, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Seifert et al. (2007) found that students in honors courses are more likely to experience intellectual growth due to the emphasis on advanced content and active learning strategies. Additionally, the challenging nature of these courses helps prepare students for graduate-level education and professional environments, as they become accustomed to high academic expectations. Deeg et al. (2024) support this by categorizing student motivations for joining honors programs, with many citing intellectual challenge as a primary driver. Kutzke et al. (2020) further note that the appeal of honors extends to less-represented academic fields when students perceive clear skill-development benefits.

Another notable value of honors courses lies in their ability to foster personal development. This highlights how honors students often experience increased confidence and self-efficacy due to their participation in demanding academic environments. Through collaborative projects, research opportunities, and presentations, students develop essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership. Furthermore, the emphasis on independent research allows students to cultivate a sense of ownership over their learning,

which can lead to greater satisfaction and personal fulfillment (Hébert & McBee, 2007). Tinder (2022) found that honors graduates often credit earlier gifted and honors programming for shaping their socioemotional resilience and leadership capacity.

Honors courses frequently incorporate interdisciplinary approaches, enabling students to connect concepts across various fields of study. This approach not only broadens students' knowledge base but also prepares them for the complexities of real-world challenges. This emphasizes the value of interdisciplinary learning in promoting adaptability and innovation among honors students. The argument for interdisciplinarity is reinforced by Suddick and Dice (2023), who showed that facilitation-based activities in honors classes improve collaborative problem-solving across disciplines. Additionally, many honors programs include opportunities for global engagement, such as study abroad experiences and courses with international themes. These initiatives expose students to diverse cultures and perspectives, fostering global citizenship and cultural competence (Kuh et al., 2011).

One of the most frequently cited challenges in honors courses is the demanding academic workload. Honors students often experience a higher level of academic pressure than their peers, which can lead to stress and burnout. The rigorous expectations of honors courses, including extensive reading, complex assignments, and comprehensive exams, can overwhelm students who are already managing multiple responsibilities. Additionally, Seifert et al. (2007) found that students in honors programs often struggle to balance the demands of academic work with extracurricular activities and personal commitments, exacerbating feelings of anxiety and exhaustion. Additionally, workload concerns are a common reason students decline to participate in honors programs, even when they meet eligibility criteria.

Honors programs can unintentionally foster a sense of exclusivity that leads to social isolation for some students. Honors students may feel disconnected from their non-honors peers due to differences in academic schedules, priorities, and perceived social dynamics. This separation can hinder their sense of belonging within the larger campus community. Moreover, students in honors courses may face stigmatization from non-honors peers, who sometimes perceive these programs as elitist.

A lack of diversity within honors courses presents another significant challenge. Honors

programs often struggle to attract a diverse student body, resulting in limited representation of underrepresented groups. This lack of diversity can lead to a narrower range of perspectives during discussions and collaborative activities, diminishing the richness of the educational experience. Kuh et al. (2011) argue that fostering inclusivity and promoting equitable access to honors programs are essential steps in addressing these challenges. Following the equity-based argument, Kutzke et al. (2020) notes that intentional outreach to underrepresented disciplines and student populations can improve diversity and broaden program impact.

The dynamic between honors students and faculty can also pose challenges. While students often appreciate the high expectations set by honors instructors, these expectations can sometimes feel unrealistic or overly demanding. Students may struggle with the lack of consistent feedback or clear guidance from faculty, which can hinder their academic performance and motivation. Furthermore, faculty members may lack training in addressing the unique needs of honors students, such as balancing rigor with support and creating an inclusive classroom environment. Ensuring that faculty are well-prepared to teach honors courses is crucial to overcoming these challenges, and Suddick and Dice (2023) suggests structured faculty facilitation training as one effective approach.

To address these challenges, researchers suggest several strategies for improving honors courses. One key recommendation is to introduce greater flexibility in course design, incorporating interdisciplinary approaches and offering a variety of course formats to accommodate diverse learning preferences. Another proposal is to foster collaboration between honors and non-honors students, which can promote inclusivity and reduce feelings of isolation (Kuh et al., 2011). Support systems are also essential for student success. Kuh et al. (2011) advocate for mentorship programs, mental health resources, and time management workshops to help students cope with the demands of honors coursework. Furthermore, training faculty to balance academic rigor with student support can ensure that honors courses remain challenging yet accessible, a recommendation also supported by Martins and Goss (2023) in their call for scaffolded research and skills support.

Although honors education has been widely studied in North America and Europe (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Seifert et al., 2007), research on such programs in emerging higher education systems

remains scarce. Most existing studies focus on mature programs with established structures and resources (Martins & Goss, 2023; Siegle et al., 2013), offering limited insight into the unique challenges faced by newly launched honors initiatives. Moreover, while prior research has addressed academic outcomes, mentorship, and workload concerns, few studies have qualitatively examined student perceptions in a Central Asian context. As Kazakhstan's Abai Honors College is the nation's first structured honors program, investigating students' views on its value, challenges, and areas for improvement offers an important contribution to the global discourse on honors education while addressing a clear geographical and methodological gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore student perceptions of specialized honors courses. Qualitative research is particularly suited for examining individual experiences and perspectives in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews provided a balance between structured questioning and flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on key issues while ensuring consistency across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Given that specialized honors programs are relatively new in Kazakhstan, a qualitative approach ensured that student experiences were interpreted within their specific academic and institutional contexts rather than reduced to quantifiable variables (Patton, 2014). Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and commonalities in student responses, following Braun and Clarke (2006)'s guidelines for qualitative data analysis.

3.2. Sampling and Population

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, a widely used technique in qualitative research that ensures respondents possess direct experience with the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2014). The study focused on students from the inaugural 2022 cohort of Honors College at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University. A total of eleven students participated, each of whom had completed **at least three specialized honors courses** Teacher Leadership, Innovative Teaching Methods, and Digital Skills for Teachers. Selection criteria included active enrollment in Honors College, completion of core honors courses, and willingness

to engage in a one-on-one interview.

Participants represented diverse academic disciplines to capture a broad range of perspectives on honors education. While gender and socioeconomic factors were not explicit selection criteria, the sample included students from varied backgrounds. The study sought to reflect a range of experiences within Honors program while acknowledging that findings may not fully capture the perspectives of all enrolled students.

3.3. Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews, each lasting between thirty and forty-five minutes. Interviews were conducted in person or via online platforms, depending on participant preference and availability. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore students' perceptions of the value of honors coursework, the challenges they encountered, and their suggestions for program improvement. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of student experiences while maintaining a structured yet adaptable framework (Brinkmann, 2014).

The interview guide was developed based on best practices in qualitative interviewing and was piloted with two students to refine question clarity and sequencing. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed, and participants were assigned pseudonyms (Tracy, 2020). Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged, ensuring the reliability of findings (Guest et al., 2006).

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six-phase framework. First, researchers familiarized themselves with the data through repeated readings of transcripts. Second, initial codes were generated based on meaningful units of text.

Third, codes were grouped into broader themes, which were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure coherence. Fourth, themes were named and defined to capture key aspects of student perceptions. Finally, findings were integrated into the results section with supporting quotations from participants.

Researchers used systematic coding and pattern identification, enhancing the reliability of the analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). To improve

intercoder reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached (Miles et al., 2014). This approach ensured that findings were systematically derived and reflective of student perspectives.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research guidelines as outlined by the American Educational Research Association (American Educational Research Association, 2011). Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the ability to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained before interviews commenced, and all identifying information was anonymized in reporting.

To minimize researcher bias, reflexivity was maintained throughout the study, with researchers documenting their interpretations and potential biases in analytic memos (Maxwell, 2013). This process helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than the researchers' preconceptions.

4. RESULTS

This study highlights the academic and structural challenges and benefits experienced by students participating in the Abai Honors College. **The findings are structured according to key themes** academic and personal benefits, challenges faced, and suggested improvements. To better reflect the qualitative nature of the study, the presentation of results integrates direct participant voices and contextual descriptions below.

4.1. Academic and Personal Benefits

Students reported significant academic and professional growth through their participation in Honors College. The program expanded their knowledge beyond the standard curriculum, provided leadership opportunities, and facilitated networking. Many students emphasized the value of exposure to international professionals, stating that it allowed them to broaden their perspectives and learn innovative teaching methodologies. The internship opportunities at reputable institutions, such as National School of Physics and Mathematics, were frequently cited as transformative experiences that helped bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Moreover, the program provided a strong platform for developing soft skills. **One student, who described himself as an introvert, reflected** “I was an introvert at heart. Thanks to Honors College I can now talk freely, without feeling constrained, and not be nervous.” Several students highlighted specific courses—particularly public speaking, business project work, and digital literacy—as transformative. **As one explained** “The seminar on oratory was very important for me, because I had problems with speech. They pointed out my mistakes, and I learned to correct them.”

Honors College emphasized leadership development as its key feature. Exposure to high-profile mentors was repeatedly mentioned. **A participant recalled meeting the CEO of a major educational project** “Meeting such a person in real life and talking to him was an honor for me... I wanted to know how he organizes such projects, and it inspired me to think bigger.” Students mentioned that they gained confidence and developed professionally. One participant noted, “Interning at the National School of Physics and Mathematics was a game-changer, providing real-world experience that enhanced my preparedness for employment.” Another student shared, “Meeting mentors and peers through the program opened doors for my career that I never imagined possible.”

4.2. Challenges Faced

Despite its advantages, students encountered numerous challenges, primarily related to scheduling conflicts, limited networking opportunities, and the lack of structured development in the program’s early phases. One of the most pressing issues was managing Honors College activities alongside primary coursework. Students often struggled to balance academic responsibilities with extracurricular engagements, leading to missed opportunities for participating in essential workshops and training sessions.

Another significant concern was the lack of structured mentorship and academic progress monitoring, particularly in the program’s initial stages. Several students described the early phases as “raw” and lacking organization. **One student noted that it created stress** “I didn’t know how to track my progress.” **Another spoke about the mental demands of major assignments** “In our business project, we had to develop a full strategy — thinking about the presentation, the questions, how to interest the audience. It was intense.” While this feedback speaks to the rigor of the program

requirements and experiences, it may also highlight the apparent lack of organization.

Although some participants reported no major difficulties, others emphasized the challenge of self-confidence. A final-year student described it as: “The main challenge was my own lack of belief in myself and my abilities. Honors helped me start overcoming that.” Such challenges and the risk of the imposter syndrome could be overcome by better networking opportunities. Some students noted that networking opportunities were insufficient, while the desire of students for more structured team-building activities was present.

Language barriers also posed difficulties, particularly for students who struggled with literary Kazakh or English in specific components of the program. As a forward-looking program the Honors College invited international speakers, and their presentations would not be universally understood in the English language: “when international speakers came, it was hard to understand at first, but over time my English improved.”

Some students struggled with online learning formats, which were introduced at various points. While some students appreciated the flexibility, others cited challenges such as poor internet connectivity and reduced engagement. One student reported, “Zoom meetings at 7-8 PM had poor internet connectivity, making participation difficult.”

4.3. Suggested Improvements

To enhance the program’s effectiveness, students suggested several key improvements. The most frequently mentioned recommendation was better curriculum integration, ensuring that Honors College coursework aligns with students’ primary academic disciplines. Many participants felt that stronger integration would provide a more seamless learning experience and reduce conflicts with their primary studies. Career guidance and job placement support were also identified as critical areas for improvement. Students emphasized the need for clearer professional development pathways, including mentorship programs, structured career guidance, and job placement assistance. One respondent stated, “More job placement programs would help us transition into our careers smoothly.”

Furthermore, students recommended the inclusion of more practical assignments and immersive experiences that simulate real-world teaching and leadership scenarios. Strengthening networking and team-building activities was another key area of focus, with participants

advocating for more structured interactions with peers, faculty, and industry professionals. "It would have been easier if I could have found friends and partners beforehand through structured team-building activities," noted one student. Several participants called for more hands-on projects and immersive simulations of teaching and leadership scenarios. One described the lasting value of a public-speaking exercise in which students had to **"sell themselves as a product in one minute"** "It's the kind of method I want to use with my own class in the future – it really opens people up."

More networking opportunities have consistently appeared as both the criticism of the program and the way for its improvement. Networking expansion was seen as essential, not only through industry contacts but also by fostering bonds within the Honors cohort. As a participant explained: "Speaking with people who have the same goals as me – that kind of intellectual exchange is what helps me grow." One student described how she landed an internship in the Daryn School for Talented Students after making connection with the School Principal who came as a guest lecturer. He talked about his experience "I liked that she [the school principal] is not afraid of innovations, she is not intimidated by any challenges.... So I contacted her after the training and she agreed to provide internship for me. I ended up spending two months at that school." Another student pointed out "After the conference I always stayed to talk to the speakers, always received certificates, always participated in activities."

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of specialized honors courses on students' academic and professional development while also revealing challenges that need to be addressed for further program enhancement. The results demonstrate that the specialized honors courses at the Abai Honors College effectively promote academic enrichment, leadership skills, and networking opportunities. The majority of students reported knowledge expansion and leadership development as key benefits, indicating that the program successfully fosters intellectual and personal growth. These findings align with previous research, which highlights the value of honors programs in equipping students with critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership competencies (Seifert et al., 2007). The presence of internship opportunities further solidifies the role of honors courses in preparing students for

professional careers.

Honors courses enhance readiness for competitive careers, a conclusion echoed by participants in this study who linked program experiences to their future professional aspirations. Internship opportunities, in particular, emerged as transformative, resonating with the argument that experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice. In the Kazakhstani context, these internships offer a unique contribution to the literature, demonstrating how such opportunities function in the country's first honors program.

Despite these advantages, students faced logistical and structural challenges. Scheduling conflicts emerged as the most reported difficulty, suggesting that balancing specialized honors courses with regular coursework remains a persistent issue. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that honors students often struggle to balance rigorous academic requirements with extracurricular and personal responsibilities. Additionally, students reported a lack of structured mentorship and limited networking opportunities, highlighting a gap in program development. Addressing these challenges could enhance students' overall engagement and success in the program.

Student-recommended improvements, such as curriculum integration and expanded career support, reflect the need for honors programs to better align with students' long-term academic and professional goals. The strong demand for practical assignments and immersive experiences further indicates that students value hands-on learning approaches. Indeed, existing research suggests that integrating experiential learning elements into honors curricula significantly improves student engagement and competency development.

Furthermore, the language barrier issue and the challenges associated with online learning highlight the need for enhanced accessibility measures. Implementing bilingual course materials and improving digital learning infrastructure may mitigate these challenges and create a more inclusive learning environment. As indicated in previous studies, providing linguistic support and technological enhancements can significantly improve students' participation and overall learning experiences in higher education programs (Tinto, 1993). The Kazakhstani context, however, adds complexity, as these barriers are shaped by the country's trilingual education system, a factor rarely addressed in honors education research.

The importance of faculty engagement and

structured mentorship also surfaced strongly in participant narratives. Research by Kuh (2008) suggests that frequent and meaningful interactions between faculty and students contribute to higher academic achievement and retention rates. Expanding mentorship initiatives, such as pairing students with faculty advisors and industry professionals, could provide necessary guidance and career preparation. Establishing structured mentorship programs may help students navigate academic challenges and maximize their potential within Honors College.

Participants further expressed the need for more structured research opportunities within the program. While some found the research project requirements as challenging, the difficulty in our opinion lied more in the timeline and structure of the projects students were involved in, rather than the actual complexity of the task. Studies indicate that undergraduate research experiences significantly enhance students' analytical skills, problem-solving abilities, and professional readiness. Encouraging honors students to participate in faculty-led research projects or independent study initiatives may further enrich their academic experience and prepare them for postgraduate studies or careers in research-intensive fields.

Lastly, expanding partnerships with industry stakeholders and alumni networks can provide students with increased exposure to real-world applications of their studies. Interestingly, some students took initiatives and asked the guest lecturers for internship opportunities. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) highlights the benefits of industry-academic collaborations in enhancing students' employability and career prospects. The 'industry' when it comes to teacher education is a school and by involving more school leaders as guest lecturers or mentors would create more internship and job placement opportunities, thereby ensuring a smoother transition from academic training to professional employment.

Overall, the study emphasizes that while the Abai Honors College has achieved notable success in enhancing students' academic capabilities and professional readiness, programmatic refinements in course scheduling, mentorship, and networking support are necessary to maximize its effectiveness. Future research should explore how targeted interventions, such as faculty development programs, structured mentorship models, and expanded industry partnerships, can enhance the long-term impact of specialized honors courses. By

addressing these areas, Honors College can further strengthen its role in preparing students for both academic and professional success.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into student perceptions of specialized honors courses at the Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, highlighting both their benefits and challenges. The findings confirm that these courses significantly enhance students' academic knowledge, leadership skills, and career readiness, with internship experiences playing a key role in professional development. The emphasis on leadership training, innovative teaching methods, and digital competencies positions Honors College as a transformative program for future educators.

At the same time, the study also identifies key challenges that hinder students from fully benefiting from the program. Scheduling conflicts, a lack of structured mentorship, limited networking opportunities, and language barriers were among the most commonly cited concerns. The initial phase of Honors College was described as lacking organization, which affected students' ability to track progress and maximize learning outcomes. These challenges highlight the need for program refinement to ensure a more seamless and supportive educational experience.

As far as limitations are concerned, qualitative methods provide in-depth insights into student experiences, yet the study is limited by its small sample size and single-institution focus. Findings may not be generalizable to other honors programs or broader student populations. Future research should consider larger, multi-institutional samples and incorporate quantitative approaches to validate findings on a broader scale (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the experiences of students in Kazakhstan's first honors program and provides a foundation for future research on specialized honors education in higher education contexts.

Future research could benefit from adopting longitudinal designs to examine the lasting impact of Honors College participation on graduates' academic trajectories, career advancement, and professional competencies. Tracking alumni over time would provide valuable insights into whether the program's reported benefits—such as leadership development, enhanced communication skills, and global perspectives—translate into long-term success in professional and academic contexts. Comparative studies between honors and non-

honors graduates could further illuminate the distinctive contributions of the program. Additionally, expanding research to include multiple institutions and diverse student populations would enhance generalizability and allow for cross-context comparisons, providing a more comprehensive understanding of honors education in Kazakhstan and beyond.

As far as implications for practice are concerned; to enhance the effectiveness of Honors College, students recommended several key improvements. These include better curriculum integration to align honors coursework with their primary academic disciplines, expanded career guidance and job placement support, structured mentorship programs, and an increased focus on practical

learning experiences. Strengthening networking opportunities through industry partnerships and faculty engagement was also emphasized as a critical step in fostering professional growth.

Addressing these areas of improvement will enable Honors College to further elevate its impact, creating a more comprehensive and inclusive educational experience. By refining program structures, enhancing mentorship initiatives, and expanding experiential learning opportunities, Honors College can better support its students in achieving academic excellence and career success. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on honors education, emphasizing the importance of adaptability and continuous innovation in specialized academic programs.

Funding Information: This study was conducted within the framework of grant funding of the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the "Training qualified personnel for the education sector through an Honors College-type of academic excellence model" project (IPH AP19677510).

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