

Analyzing the Challenges and Requirements of Supporting Talented and Outstanding Students in the Seventh Development Plan Act

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ABSTRACT

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The present study was conducted with the aim of examining the challenges and operational requirements of supporting talented and outstanding students (as stipulated in Clause “B” of Article 96 of the Seventh Development Plan Act). Given the country’s needs and priorities for specialized human resources, particularly in certain fields, the necessity of supporting these students for the scientific and economic development of the country is undeniable. To this end, adopting a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and expert panels, eliciting the views of 15 academic and executive experts in this field. The data analysis method employed was content analysis. According to the findings, the main challenges in implementing the provisions related to supporting talented and outstanding students in the Seventh Development Plan Act include: limited financial credits and lack of resources, insufficient coherence and coordination among policymaking and executive bodies responsible for student support, a mismatch between university majors and the capacities and needs of the labor market, and shortcomings in the continuity and comprehensiveness of the support provided to students. In this regard, the identified operational requirements include structural, policy-related, financial, executive, supervisory, and inter-sectoral requirements, each encompassing several sub-components. Among the key recommendations of this study for the effective implementation of Clause “B” of Article 96 are the drafting and ratification of a comprehensive law on supporting top talents, as well as the formulation of harmonizing policies across all executive and responsible bodies in the country.

Keywords: Student support, talented and outstanding students, disciplines aligned with national needs, human capital, Seventh Development Plan Law

Introduction

Human capital is universally recognized as the cornerstone of sustainable development in advanced societies. In Iran, academics, scientists, elites, and students—particularly talented and outstanding students—represent the nation’s most critical assets. Targeted investment in this group yields the highest returns by enhancing scientific, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, ultimately driving comprehensive national progress. Yet, rising elite migration, driven by superior opportunities abroad, underscores the urgency of improving quality of life and support systems for these students (Haghi, Karamollah, & Fouladgar, 2014).

Talented students possess exceptional potential to become scientific leaders and drivers of progress in priority fields. However, declining enrollment in foundational sciences (mathematics, physics, chemistry) and certain engineering disciplines (civil, mechanical, industrial), coupled with oversupply in medicine, computer engineering, law, and psychology, has created imbalances in human capital distribution. This mismatch threatens balanced national development, reduces elite density in critical disciplines, demotivates faculty, and generates both unemployment in oversaturated fields and talent shortages in others.

Clause “B” of Article 96 of the Seventh Development Plan Act attempts to address this by requiring the Student Welfare Fund to provide financial aid to talented students in nationally needed disciplines. Despite its legislative intent, the clause faces significant implementation risks. This study therefore investigates two questions:

1. What are the operational challenges in implementing support for talented and outstanding students under the Seventh Plan?
2. What structural, policy, financial, executive, supervisory, and inter-sectoral requirements are necessary for successful implementation?

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach using inductive content analysis (Holsti, 2019; Iman & Noushadi, 2011). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and an expert panel with 15 purposefully selected academic and executive experts deeply familiar with talent support policies. Participants included senior officials from the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Student Welfare Fund, National Elite Foundation, and university leaders. Validity was ensured through member checking and peer debriefing; reliability was enhanced by detailed audit trails. Analysis followed conventional content analysis procedures, allowing categories to emerge directly from the data.

Findings

Challenges Experts identified five major challenges:

1. Financial constraints and resource shortages: Projected costs for the first year alone reach 1,680 billion tomans for ~28,000 students, with amounts rising annually. Budgets for 2025 were not allocated due to procedural issues, and delayed disbursements remain probable without guaranteed funding.
2. Lack of institutional coherence and coordination: Multiple entities (Ministries of Science and Health, National Elite Foundation, Student Welfare Fund, Vice-Presidency for Science and Technology) operate in silos, causing duplication, resource waste, and inconsistent definitions of “talented student” and “priority discipline.”
3. Mismatch between academic programs and labor-market needs: Many majors remain outdated; content has not been revised in years. Priority fields suffer low enrollment while oversubscribed disciplines produce unemployment. The absence of dynamic mechanisms for updating priority lists undermines the clause’s effectiveness.
4. Neglect of non-material and motivational supports: Current policies focus almost exclusively on financial aid, ignoring psychological support, sense of belonging, professional networking, project participation, and recognition of students’ value to society.
5. Lack of continuity and comprehensiveness: Support remains episodic and fragmented rather than forming a lifelong talent pipeline from identification through employment and entrepreneurship.

Operational Requirements

Six requirement categories emerged:

- Structural: Establish a high-level coordinating council (including Ministries of Science, Health, Plan and Budget Organization, and National Elite Foundation) with binding authority; redefine mandates to eliminate overlaps.
- Policy-related: Develop clear, comprehensive, and unambiguous definitions of “talented/outstanding student” and “nationally needed disciplines”; create multi-dimensional identification systems (academic performance + creativity, leadership, social responsibility); design comprehensive support packages combining material and non-material incentives.
- Financial: Secure sustainable, escalating budgetary lines in annual budgets; diversify funding sources (public budget + industry partnerships); ensure meaningful stipend levels that allow full-time research (experts suggested 1.5–2 times minimum wage for PhD students).
- Executive: Decentralize implementation to top universities while maintaining national standards; develop integrated digital platforms for application, monitoring, and feedback.
- Supervisory: Establish independent monitoring bodies and measurable KPIs; require periodic impact assessments and public reporting.
- Inter-sectoral: Mandate formal coordination mechanisms and joint programs among all stakeholders; link universities, industry, and executive agencies for employment guarantees and industry-sponsored scholarships.

Conclusion

The findings align with previous Iranian studies (Mortazavi et al., 2022; Kiani et al., 2018; Fouladgar et al., 2012) that highlighted institutional fragmentation, inadequate facilities, and funding instability as persistent barriers to talent support. The current implementation framework—relying primarily on the Student Welfare Fund and a narrow GPA-based definition of talent—reproduces past failures and risks becoming another short-lived, resource-draining initiative.

From theories of justice in education (Rawls, 1971; Merry, 2008) and human capital (Becker via Hafenstein et al., 2022), supporting talented students is both an equity imperative and an economic necessity. Yet the approved executive bylaw retains ambiguous definitions and fails to adopt multi-criteria identification or dynamic priority lists—exactly the weaknesses experts flagged. Without fundamental restructuring, the clause will likely achieve only marginal impact while perpetuating elite migration and human capital imbalances.

Recommendations (Policy Proposals)

1. Enact a comprehensive “Law on Support for Top Talents” that clearly designates lead agencies, coordination mechanisms, and sustainable funding.
2. Establish a permanent National Talent Council with binding authority over all entities.
3. Create dynamic, evidence-based mechanisms for updating priority disciplines annually using labor-market data, provincial needs assessments, and employment maps.
4. Shift from uniform financial aid to differentiated, meaningful support packages (stipends, priority housing, research grants, industry internships, fast-track civil-service exemptions).
5. Mandate university participation in policy design and implementation
6. Require industry co-funding and employment commitments for supported students in priority fields.

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