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Paper

mBET-excellence – The coaching programme for highly motivated and high-performing students

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Abstract

This study presents the mBET¹-excellence coaching programme for highly motivated and high-performing students, developed by the Austrian Research and Support Centre for the Gifted and Talented (ÖZBF). The programme is based on the specifically developed mBET-excellence-Model, which uniquely combines theoretical frameworks from giftedness research with principles of Positive Psychology. We piloted mBET-excellence at the University of Education Salzburg Stefan Zweig in Austria during the 2023/24 academic year, involving seven student teachers (primary level). In order to optimize the quality of the programme and evaluate participant satisfaction, we conducted a survey. We collected data through semi-structured interviews and subsequently we analysed them using content analysis in MAXQDA. This article highlights both the strengths of the programme and necessary adaptations derived from the interviews.

Keywords: higher education, talent development, excellence coaching, Positive Psychology

1. Introduction

Compared to other European Union countries, the Austrian higher education system offers relatively few courses or programmes specifically designed for excellent students (Fritz & Luger-Bazinger, 2019; Fritz & Schmid, 2019). In most cases, support programmes are only available at the postgraduate stage, where existing mentoring initiatives tend to provide broad, generalised assistance to students. There is room for improvement regarding excellence coaching as most mentoring programmes focus primarily on general academic support or career guidance. There is an urgent need in higher education for coaching that supports high-performing students in achieving academic excellence and fostering personal excellence. Psychological and personal development aspects, such as mental health, stress management and wellbeing factors, are rarely integrated into current support structures. High-performing students often experience significant pressure; targeted support and coaching could offer valuable relief.

Although mentoring and coaching programmes do exist, there remains a gap for a high-quality excellence coaching initiative that promotes academic and personal development. Such a programme would aim to unlock students' potential while supporting their long-term personal and professional growth. This lack of long-term and structured development concepts including the promotion of excellence is now to be filled with our concept of mBET-excellence.

A long-term individual support-programme already exists for high-achieving pupils starting at the age of 12: *mBETplus* (Stahl et al., 2019), developed by the Austrian Research and Support Centre for the Gifted and Talented (ÖZBF). This coaching approach encourages young, gifted and highly motivated pupils to define personal goals and reflect on and train meta-skills required to achieve them. Thus, a new concept has now been developed that incorporates the principles of Positive Psychology and wellbeing to provide a continuous and appropriate framework for talent and excellence development in higher education.

2. Theoretical Background: mBET-excellence-Model

The theoretical basis for the coaching programme is the mBET-excellence-Model (Figure 1), a normative model developed by the ÖZBF. It incorporates relevant, research-based aspects and factors for developing excellence and highlights their complex interactions. It is an integrative systemic-dynamic model based on the Actiotope Model of Giftedness (Ziegler, 2005, 2008), the Talent Development Megamodel (Subotnik et al., 2011) and the PERMA model from Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2011).

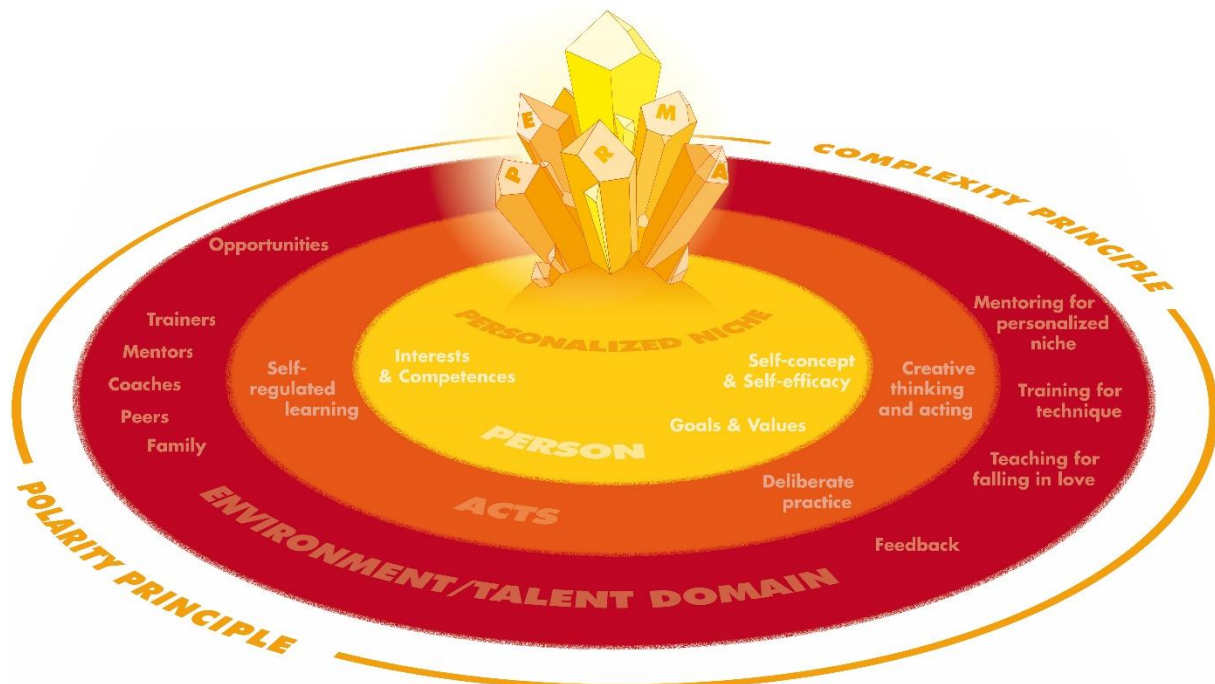


Figure 1: mBET-excellence-Model – an integrative systemic-dynamic model for developing excellence (illustration by the authors)

The three ellipses in the model refer to the Actiotope Model of Giftedness (Ziegler, 2005, 2008).

2.1 Environment ellipse

The specification of the outer *Environment* ellipse illustrates a focus on the individual *Talent* domain. We identified three major aspects as essential for establishing an excellence-promoting environment. The first aspect is diverse *Opportunities* in the sense of acceleration and enrichment activities—as individually fitting possibilities to strengthen students’ competences as well as their self-efficacy (see inner ellipse) in consciously taking chance of them. The hereby mentioned aspect chance is an adaptation of Gagné’s identically named factor (Gagné, 2004, 2013). The second aspect refers to supportive persons, including *Family*, *Peers* as well as experts, who shape individual development as *Trainers*, *Coaches* and *Mentors* (‘persons in the shadow’, Gruber et al., 2008). The third aspect involves methods for excellence development. In addition to development-oriented, formative *Feedback* (*deliberate practice*, Ericsson et al., 1993), we included the three instruction modi (Bloom, 1985; Subotnik et al., 2011): At the beginning of their process, talented people recall one or more persons who motivated and inspired them through *Teaching for falling in love*. Thereafter they remember people who supported them through *Training for technique* in the acquisition of domain-specific skills, knowledge, rules, values etc. Finally, *Mentoring for personalized² niche* helped them finding and developing the specific individual focus or unique selling point within their domain.

2.2 Acts ellipse

Within the *Acts* ellipse *Creative thinking and acting* promotes the importance of parallel focused creativity development. The Talent Development Megamodel (Subotnik et al., 2011), as a synthetic model between theory and practice, includes creativity as a dynamic

process that requires development and continuous support from little-c-Creativity, for example, original ideas in childhood, to domain-changing achievements of Big-C-Creativity (Csíkszentmihályi et al., 2018). *Deliberate practice*, as another component of action, is based on expertise research (Ericsson & Harwell, 2019; Gruber et al., 2008). It is defined as “highly structured activity, the explicit goal of which is to improve performance” (Ericsson & Harwell, 2019, p. 5/2). *Deliberate practice* should be guided and “supervised by a teacher to allow individualized diagnosis of errors, informative feedback”, and who decides “when transitions to more complex and challenging tasks are appropriate” (Ericsson & Harwell, 2019, p. 3/2). As a third component of the developmental process *Self-regulated learning* (Zimmermann, 2002) enables talented students to plan, carry out and reflect on their talent development process effectively. It includes competences such as metacognition, time and resource management and volition.

2.3 Person ellipse

As key personal components for talent development, we integrated high *Interest* (Krapp, 1992) in our model, which correlates significantly positive with high achievement and intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, we focus on already observable *Competences* (Subotnik et al., 2011). To discover the *Personalized niche* (Subotnik et al., 2011)—visualised as the *Excellence-Crystal* in our model—it is important to set challenging *Goals* (Ziegler, 2005, 2008) and reflect on personal and societal *Values* (Schwartz, 2012). Studies on giftedness and meaningful life (Pollet & Schnell, 2017) show positive effects on high achievement through a strong sense of meaning and wellbeing. Of further consideration within the *Person* ellipse are her*his *Self-concept* (Möller & Nagy, 2016) as well as her*his *Self-efficacy* expectations (Bandura, 1997; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 2002).

2.4 Excellence-Crystal

A unique characteristic, and core element, of our model is the *Excellence-Crystal*: it constitutes the personal centre and interacts with all the other model components. The *Excellence-Crystal* symbolises the established and developed *Personalized niche* (Subotnik et al., 2011) in combination with the PERMA model from Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2011). PERMA stands as an acronym for the consideration and increase of *Positive Emotions*, for *Engagement* in life and its individual tasks, for cultivating positive *Relationships*, for a life based on high value of *Meaning* and individual and societal values, as well as for striving for *Accomplishment* and celebration of success (Seligman, 2011). A strengthening of the five PERMA factors should lead to a higher wellbeing as well as to a flourishing of the person.

2.5 Complexity and Polarity principle

The two principles of *Complexity* and *Polarity* surround the mBET-excellence-Model in an additional outer ellipse. They illustrate the various interactions and correlations between the model components at a meta-level. The *Complexity principle* reflects the complex individual connections and focal points within each person’s talent development. Ziegler also describes his Actiotope Model as a complex “system that is distinguished by manifold interactions among these components” (Ziegler, 2005, p. 426).

The second principle, *Polarity*, builds upon the first by representing mutually dependent poles, both of which are essential for achieving excellence. This principle is theoretically based on Csíkszentmihályi’s flow studies, particularly the idea that creative individuals can

shift situationally and flexibly between the following 10 polar personality traits: “energetic/quiet, smart/naive, playful/disciplined, imaginative/realistic, introverted/extroverted, humble/proud, androgynous (masculine/feminine), rebellious/traditional, passionate/objective, sensitivity to suffering and joy” (Csíkszentmihályi et al., 2018, p. 223–224). In our model, this theory of the polar, creative personality suggests that talented individuals should be capable of acting competently and flexibly across a continuum of such opposing demands. For instance, *Creative thinking and acting*—which is associated with flow and feelings of joy—may represent a contrasting phase to *Deliberate practice*, which typically involves effort and discipline.

3. mBET-excellence coaching

The systemic approach to supporting gifted and talented individuals is characterised by a shift in perspective. Instead of focusing on what a single talented person requires for optimal development, we ask how a talent-promoting environment should be designed to support all talented individuals. Based on this premise, we designed a coaching programme for highly motivated and high-achieving students, addressing the lack of appropriate support for this target group in Austrian higher education (Fritz, 2015; Fritz & Luger-Bazinger, 2019; Hinterplattner & Sabitzer, 2022). We piloted the mBET-excellence coaching at the University of Education Salzburg Stefan Zweig in 2023/24, lasting two semesters (eight months total). Seven students participated in the pilot programme.

3.1 Nomination

The selection process consisted of two stages: external nomination by lecturers, followed by a personal application (letter of motivation). Self-nomination was also possible. Nomination took place in the summer semester prior to the start of the mBET-excellence coaching. For phase one, we recruited a group of lecturers based on three criteria, namely, they knew all students in at least three subjects collectively, had a holistic view of each student and saw themselves as ‘door-openers’. We asked these lecturers to identify students from the current academic year using two impulse-lists. These lists included potential characteristics of excellent students such as searching for innovative solutions, adoring interdisciplinary thinking, constructive use of feedback and self-efficacy. One list was based on the Talent Development Megamodel (Subotnik et al., 2011), developed specifically for the mBET-excellence programme; the other was a talent-spotting list published by CoTalent³. In a nominators’ conference the lecturers nominated a group of 12–15 students based on their initial submissions. For the subsequent written application (phase two) nominees submitted: a CV with educational background, prior achievements and engagement, a self-enquiry form on talents and strengths and a letter of motivation outlining their expectations of the mBET-excellence coaching.

3.2 Coaching concept

The coaching concept is based on the mBET-excellence-Model, which aims to support students’ wellbeing as well as their talent development. As a working foundation, we developed the mBET-excellence handbook (Bögl, 2023⁴), which structures the content for the mBET-excellence coaching year. We adapted original tools from Positive Psychology for the purpose of excellence development and linked them to components of the mBET-excellence-Model. The coaching year was divided into three phases. The first phase *Overview and first insights* (two months) introduced the model and its interactions with the

PERMA factors using specific coaching tools. In the second phase *PERMA* (five months) students explored each PERMA factor in relation to their individual development. The third and final phase *Transfer & transformation* (one month) concluded and consolidated the coaching process.

The programme consisted of four different settings: (1) single coaching sessions, (2) collective group sessions, (3) peer-coaching, (4) self-coaching.

4. Research questions

We evaluated the first implementation of the mBET-excellence coaching through an exploratory qualitative research approach. The evaluation addressed the following questions:

- How did students experience the programme?
- Which aspects of the programme should be maintained or changed?
- Which personal benefits, if any, did participants perceive from their involvement?

5. Methods

To gather detailed feedback for future development of mBET-excellence, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Helfferich, 2022) via zoom with all seven participants. Of these, 85.71% identified as female. The average age at the time of the interview was 23.2 years (SD = 1.94, min = 22, max = 27, missing = 2).

The interviews were based on the following four questions:

- What did you like about mBET-excellence and what should be retained?
- What was less effective and what should be changed?
- Did you benefit from participating in mBET-excellence? To what extent?
- How could the programme be structured to maximise student benefit and motivation?

We explored each coaching setting through these questions.

One participant withdrew after the first semester (winter semester 2023/24); to understand the reasons, her interview was conducted in March 2024. The remaining interviews took place in June 2024, following programme completion. The average interview length was 26.29 minutes (min = 15.00, max = 30.00). A second person attended each session to take summarised notes.

We analysed the summarised transcripts using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022) with MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2021). Inductive category formation was used to capture feedback on the innovative nature of mBET-excellence. To ensure coding consistency, two researchers coded 30% of the transcripts independently. The first coder marked the relevant text passages. We achieved a good to very good intercoder reliability (0.80; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022), measured using Cohen's kappa (Brennan & Prediger, 1981). We identified two main categories, 14 sub-categories and 39 sub-sub-categories.

6. Results

Through the process of inductive coding, we formed two main categories based on the four key questions: (1) feedback on the mBET-excellence concept and (2) benefits of participating in mBET-excellence. All frequencies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequencies of categories, sub-categories and sub-sub-categories

Categories and sub-categories	Sub-sub-categories	Frequency (number of people)	%	Coded segments
1. Feedback on the mBET-excellence concept				
1.1. General/ organisational framework	1.1.1. Roles of coach and course leader	6	86	10
	1.1.2. Preliminary information	4	57	7
	1.1.3. Time frame	4	57	5
	1.1.4. Evaluation	3	43	4
	1.1.5. Semester recommendation	4	57	4
	1.1.6. Scheduling	3	43	4
	1.1.7. Time pressure	2	29	2
	1.1.8. Desire for additional meetings	1	14	2
	1.1.9. Other	5	71	10
1.2. Single coaching sessions	1.2.1. Evaluation	7	100	11
	1.2.2. Frequency, duration and coordination of appointments	4	57	7
	1.2.3. Individuality	4	57	6
	1.2.4. Content and structure	4	57	6
	1.2.5. External premises	2	29	2
	1.2.6. Professionalism of the coach	2	29	3
	1.2.7. Other	2	29	3
1.3. Collective group sessions	1.3.1. No course character/room setting	6	86	14
	1.3.2. Less theory/more practice	4	57	6
	1.3.3. Inclusion of topics from peer-coaching	2	29	4
	1.3.4. Personal topics/problems	2	29	2
	1.3.5. Use of tools	2	29	3
	1.3.6. Flexibility	2	29	2
	1.3.7. Other	4	57	6
1.4. Peer-coaching	1.4.1. Interpersonal relationships/togetherness	6	86	10
	1.4.2. Necessity	2	29	4
	1.4.3. Group formation	3	43	4
	1.4.4. Success factors for groups	1	14	4
	1.4.5. Coordination of schedules	2	29	3
	1.4.6. Freedom in implementation	2	29	3
	1.4.7. Clarification of tools	2	29	3
	1.4.8. Liability	2	29	5
	1.4.9. Other	2	29	2
1.5. Self-coaching	1.5.1. Flexibility and options	6	86	15
	1.5.2. Other	2	29	3

	<i>1.6.1. Tools</i>	5	71	9
1.6. mBET-excellence handbook	<i>1.6.2. No reduction</i>	5	71	8
	<i>1.6.3. Relevance (for the future)</i>	5	57	6
	<i>1.6.4. Structure</i>	3	43	5
	<i>1.6.5. Layout</i>	3	43	5
2. Benefits of participating in mBET-excellence				
2.1.	<i>Specific content and tools</i>	5	71	9
2.2.	<i>Values</i>	2	29	2
2.3.	<i>Communication/ reflection</i>	3	43	4
2.4.	<i>Professional field: teacher</i>	1	14	2
2.5.	<i>Intensifying social contacts</i>	2	29	2
2.6.	<i>Considerations for the future</i>	2	29	4
2.7.	<i>Perception of groups</i>	1	14	4
2.8.	<i>Other</i>	3	43	4

6.1 Feedback on the mBET-excellence concept

We formed six sub-categories for the first category, feedback on the mBET-excellence concept, namely: (1) general/organisational framework, (2) single coaching sessions, (3) collective group sessions, (4) peer-coaching, (5) self-coaching and (6) mBET-excellence handbook. The most frequently coded sub-sub-categories are detailed below.

(1) General/organisational framework

This sub-category includes all feedback on mBET-excellence not directly related to any specific coaching setting. We formed nine sub-sub-categories. Several statements related to the *roles of the coach and course leader*, a topic addressed in 86% of the interviews (10 segments). Respondents indicated that the programme would benefit from the same person leading the collective group and the single coaching sessions. *If the coach also leads the whole group, the benefits could be even greater* (interview 4, position 39). *Preliminary information* was mentioned in 57% of interviews (7 segments), with respondents wishing for more details before the programme began, particularly about why they were selected and what to expect (e.g., information sheet, kick-off event). *More information is needed about why exactly I was chosen, transparency (own characteristics)* (interview 5, position 49). *Time frame* was mentioned in 57% of interviews (5 segments). Generally, respondents found the two-semester duration appropriate and advised against shortening it. *The time frame was very suitable (over two semesters). A change to just one semester is not a good idea* (interview 3, position 2). Additional themes included *evaluation, semester recommendation, scheduling, time pressure, desire for additional meetings* and other miscellaneous remarks, further sub-sub-categorised as *other*.

(2) Single coaching sessions

Seven sub-sub-categories emerged here. *Evaluation* was addressed in all interviews (11 segments), with unanimous agreement that these sessions were beneficial and should be retained. *I benefited most from the single coaching sessions* (interview 5, position 2). *Frequency, duration and coordination of appointments* were mentioned in 57% of interviews (7 segments), with several suggesting longer sessions: *The length of 45 minutes is very short. By the time you can really talk about the relevant topics, the time is*

almost up again. You are in the middle of something and have to stop, 60 minutes would be much more comfortable (interview 3, position 24–25). *Individuality* was also noted in 57% of interviews (6 segments), with appreciation for the personalised attention. *The coach had prepared a lot of impulses, but was also flexible with regard to the issues and concerns that were important to us students at that time* (interview 2, position 13). Other themes included *content and structure, external premises, professionalism of the coach* and miscellaneous remarks grouped as *other*.

(3) Collective group sessions

This sub-category included feedback on the eight full-group units. We identified seven sub-sub-categories. *No course character/room setting* appeared in 86% of interviews (14 segments), with a preference for informal, non-classroom environments. *Different places are ideal, e.g. when the weather is nice it would be perfect outdoors* (interview 5, position 30). *Less theory/more practice* was noted in 57% of interviews (6 segments), with request for a more practical, applied approach: *Collective group sessions are tricky because they're based on a lot of theory, and it's not that easy to link it to what's going on right now* (final interview after one semester, position 11). *Inclusion of peer-coaching topics* was suggested in 29% of interviews (4 segments). *Converse with other people who have dealt with the same topic and then introduce it to the whole group* (interview 2, position 50). Other coded items included *personal topics/problems, use of tools, flexibility* and miscellaneous remarks grouped as *other*.

(4) Peer-coaching

This sub-category focused on feedback about peer group meetings, yielding nine sub-sub-categories. *Interpersonal relationships/togetherness* was mentioned in 86% of interviews (10 segments), with many valuing social bonding. It became apparent that friendships had been formed through peer-coaching. *Despite the fact that it was initially a heterogeneous group of people, the group has grown together very well* (interview 3, position 5). *Necessity of peer-coaching* was debated in 29% of the interviews (4 segments), with varied opinions on its importance. *Peer-coaching would not have been necessary but was still helpful* (interview 1, position 18). *Group formation* appeared in 43% of interviews (4 segments), with appreciation for self-selection and suggestion to rotate groups. *Mixing the peer-coaching groups so that everyone can come into contact with each other. This also strengthens group cohesion for the collective group sessions* (interview 6, item 31). Other sub-sub-categories included *success factors for groups, coordination of schedules, freedom in implementation, clarification of tools, liability* and miscellaneous remarks grouped as *other*.

(5) Self-coaching

This sub-category covered ongoing individual reflection during the coaching year. We identified two sub-sub-categories. *Flexibility and options* appeared in 86% of the interviews (15 segments), with participants requesting more autonomy in tool selection: *There should be more flexibility here by being able to choose tools that exactly match the current life circumstances. It would be useful to have a reduction in quantity and more freedom of choice* (interview 3, position 30). Miscellaneous remarks were again grouped under the sub-sub-category *other* (29% of interviews, 3 segments). For example, it is mentioned that a more detailed explanation would be needed for the tools' independent

implementation. *The tools would need a brief introduction, guidance on exactly how they work* (interview 5, position 38).

(6) mBET-excellence handbook

This sub-category included feedback on the written manual containing instructions and coaching tools. We coded five sub-sub-categories. *Tools* were discussed in 71% of interviews (9 segments), with some finding the workload excessive. *It was perceived as a to-do list* (final interview after one semester, position 10). *No reduction* of the mBET-excellence handbook needed was supported by 71% of interviews, (8 segments). *The scope of the manual is well suited* (interview 3, position 14). *Relevance (for the future)* was mentioned in 57% (6 segments), with the handbook seen as a useful long-term resource. *It is suitable for different situations in life* (interview 4, position 35). Other feedback addressed *structure and layout*.

6.2 Benefits of participating in mBET-excellence

We formed eight sub-categories under this second main category: (1) *Specific content and tools* were highlighted in 71% of interviews (9 segments), particularly tools like the 'gratitude journal' and 'energy givers and robbers'. (2) *Values* were recognised as an important aspect of daily life by 29% of participants (2 segments). (3) *Communication/reflection* was mentioned in 43% of interviews (4 segments); students reported more frequent reflection after participation. (4) *Professional field: teacher*, 14% of interviews (2 segments) indicated the programme helped students prepare for teaching careers. (5) *Intensifying social contacts* was coded in 29% (2 segments), noting improved relationships with peers. (6) *Considerations for the future*, 29% (4 segments) planned to apply what they learned beyond the programme. (7) *Perception of groups* was addressed in 14% of interviews (4 segments), reflecting on group dynamics. (8) *Other* (43%, 4 segments) included personal development, feeling more relaxed and reduced performance pressure.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Students appreciated the mBET-excellence coaching and found it helpful. They benefitted from specific content and tools, which they described as enriching. They recognised the importance of values, engaged in more frequent reflection, formed meaningful relationships, applied the programme's content in their personal lives and reported feeling more relaxed and less pressured to perform. Overall, they experienced personal development and felt that the programme supported their preparation for a future teaching career.

The evaluation provided valuable insights into which mBET-excellence components to maintain, and which may benefit from refinement in future implementations. While students received many features of the pilot programme positively, which should be maintained, students also made suggestions for improvement. Key areas to address include the need for clearer preliminary information and transparency regarding the nomination process and criteria. Students expressed a preference for consistency in personnel leading both group and single coaching sessions. They suggested reducing the amount of theoretical input delivered via presentations in group sessions and allowing greater flexibility in self-coaching and the use of the handbook.

Students considered the two-semester time frame appropriate. It should be retained, as should the practice of holding sessions outside traditional university settings. Students reported that they benefitted most from the individual coaching sessions, especially when addressing personal concerns. Where possible, the duration of these sessions could be extended. Moreover, students considered peer-coaching helpful in fostering a sense of social connection; however, not all students regarded it as essential. If retained, peer-coaching activities could be more closely integrated with the collective group sessions. The handbook should remain available in full length, as students see it as a valuable future resource; however, the mandatory workload associated with it should be reduced.

Although only seven students participated in the initial implementation of the mBET-excellence programme, they provide in-depth feedback on its benefits and limitations, offering useful suggestions for improvement. An effectiveness analysis, examining whether the programme achieves its primary aims of enhancing participants' wellbeing and talent development has yet to be conducted. This is planned as part of a future research project, once a larger participant pool is available to enable robust quantitative analysis. Overall, the mBET-excellence programme is grounded in a solid theoretical foundation, introducing the newly developed mBET-excellence-Model and evolving into the mBET-excellence coaching concept, which the first cohort of participants received well and found useful.

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¹ mBET is an acronym for the German term *multidimensionales Begabungs-Entwicklungs-Tool*, which means multidimensional talent development tool.

² The decision for the American spelling of this specific word is based on the original term *Personalized niche* (Subotnik et al., 2011).

³ <https://www.cotalent.eu/resources/youtalent-spotter/cotalent-talent-spotting-list/>

⁴ mBET-excellence handbook in German: https://phsalzburg.at/wp-content/uploads/mBET-excellence-Handbuch_2023.pdf