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Honours in Australia: Globally Recognised Preparation for a Career in Research (or Elsewhere)

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay we consider the unique position of honours within undergraduate programs in Australian universities and the consequent implications for constructing pathways to research. A tension arises in academic disciplines that see honours as a fourth-year skilling program focused on the workplace when, at the institutional level, honours is positioned as the prerequisite for entry to a PhD. What emerges are competing pressures for advanced vocational training and preliminary research training for doctoral research. The tension is exacerbated by the need for universities to generate research cohorts in order to attract the funding that such cohorts bring to a university.

BACKGROUND

Our discussion of honours in Australia occurs at a time when Australian funding bodies themselves recognise that “Honours, as undertaken at Australian universities, are not commonly part of degree structures overseas and are therefore not well understood internationally” (Department of Industry Innovation Science and Research [DIISR], 2011, 9). Our discussion occurs also at a time when a First Class Honours degree or equivalent is a hurdle in eligibility for a government-funded Higher Degree by Research scholarship. An examination of historic and current documents relating to honours in Australia is largely informed by the assumption that a vibrant honours program increases the likelihood of cohorts of well-trained researchers completing their degree on time, if not early, and providing a potential pool of future academics to staff university programs.

No specific policy debates or discussions on honours took place until 2011, the only extant document relating to honours programs in Australia having been that of Murray in 1957. It is worthwhile revisiting Murray's Report of the Committee on Australian Universities to illustrate the point we want to make regarding honours. In the report, he describes the university library, rendering a description redolent of a cloistered, sequestered apartment in a monastery. The library, he writes, is a

place where [the student] is welcomed and encouraged to pursue a personal and independent search for knowledge and understanding, where his [sic] capacities for independence of thought and judgment are enlarged, and where, above all, he [sic] is treated as a scholar, to be provided with the peaceful and uncrowded conditions conducive to scholarly work. (51)

Books and journals are absent from the space he describes, as are desks, tables, carrels, chairs, and librarians. The ideal is all that furnishes this space, and it is one to which students come: it is not one that emits the information it stores in the form of borrowings to remote places or even to the students' places of study on campus. Murray's report encapsulates the 1950s perception of the university student within a university construct that is not connected to country, language, creed, or race. It could be anywhere in the world. It exists as an infinitive (Zeegers & McCauley). This articulation of university study was driving policy-making in relation to universities in 1957, when Menzies, Prime Minister at the time, accepted Murray's recommendations for massive financial assistance to universities, setting the pattern for increasing Commonwealth Government involvement in university education (Zeegers & Barron).

In addressing the position of honours programs, the Hansard record of a 2008 hearing by the Melbourne Senate Committee notes that, between Murray's 1957 report and the time of the hearing, "We did not even have manned space flight, computers were almost non-existent, and yet it is something that is unquestioned" (29). Recent moves towards establishing the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the attendant Australian Quality Framework (Council for the Australian Quality Framework) have started to address the inattention to honours programs. The new standards should go a long way toward addressing the lack of agreement among universities about honours, grades, and criteria for these, with the view that:

The purpose of the Bachelor Honours Degree qualification type is to qualify individuals who apply a body of knowledge in a specific

context to undertake professional work and as a pathway for research and further learning. (Council for the Australian Qualifications Framework, 39)

Between 1957 and 2011, honours remained a largely uncontested feature of Australian universities. The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC) publication *Fourth Year Honours Programs: Guidelines for Good Practice* no longer exists as a discrete document but was a 1995 publication based on the Guthrie Report of 1994. The Guthrie Report is another document that is no longer available, so we cannot refer to its recommendations. Something (but not a great deal) of the importance of the honours award can be gleaned from the figures generated from the 2002 *National Summary of Post Graduate Awards* published by the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee.

The Graduate Careers Council of Australia's *Course Experience Questionnaire Tables* of 2005 does not distinguish between those who did and did not graduate with honours on any of its scales for the universities across Australia, nor do the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDoGS) have any information about honours programs or any documentation to suggest they have ever discussed honours. Even though honours is an undergraduate and not graduate program, we would expect that—since honours or at least honours equivalence is the main entry point to the postgraduate studies that they oversee—the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies would articulate a public stance on the issue.

As of 2005, the website of the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST)—which became the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) after the 2007 change in government—had been content-free on the subject, as had the site for the Chairs of Academic Boards. A report conducted on behalf of the Australian Historical Association (Millar & Peel) did indicate the numbers of honours students in history at Australian universities, but these data are too specialised to be of much value in generalisations about honours programs across universities in the country. A compilation of DEST data sets in relation to enrollments in honours programs in Australian universities in 2005 (Kleeman) shows a concentration of numbers in the larger urban centres, not in rural and regional universities. The local variations indicated the need for national guidelines and policy, backed with appropriate funding programs, to ensure a measure of consistent outcomes of honours programs in relation to national awards, particularly as these apply to ranking for scholarships.

A 2005 comparison of honours outcomes with master's outcomes was illuminating at the time. A student wanting to take up higher-degree research study needed honours or some sort of equivalent, and there was a strong

argument for honours equivalence especially when it came to applications for scholarships. Master's by Coursework and Master's by Research degrees show percentages of research components undertaken by students. A Master's by Coursework, for example, usually serves as an argument for honours equivalence given its general inclusion of a 25% research component. No such transparency is evident across the universities studied in relation to their honours programs. As a consequence, the universities' research higher-degree programs have more than likely been geared to graduates from their own honours programs, but Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs) and Australian Postgraduate Awards Industry (APAI)s are national awards, which means that graduates who would transfer to different universities in pursuit of such awards may have encountered a measure of variation in expectations in relation to research skills training that may or may not have been well founded.

The lack of debate, let alone conversation, over the years suggests that honours has been taken for granted as a pathway through the university system and that there has been little need to articulate its place in the system, hence the lack of documentation produced by universities or related bodies such as the AVCC, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), or the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST), which is now the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), up to 2012.

In Australia, honours has a number of appellations to indicate various classifications. Universities in Australia refer to a First Class Honours as either a H1 or a H1A; a Second Class Honours is referred to as H2A and H2B or H11A and H11B; a Third Class Honours may be referred to as simply Honours. We found a lack of consistency in applying these appellations across Australian universities, but in this essay we will use H1 to indicate a First Class Honours and H2 as a Second Class Honours.

Honours programs have traditionally followed two formats in Australian universities: three years plus one honours year or four years with honours embedded. Within both formats, we have found that seven Victorian universities, for example, award H1 for a minimum 80% grade point average while two award H1 for a minimum 85%. Universities also vary in the ways H2 is allocated, not to mention H2As, H2Bs, and so on. We have categorised honours programs for 24 of the 37 public universities in Australia. Three patterns emerged:

Category 1: H1 is awarded consistently across the university for a grade of 85+. Eight universities were in this category.

Category 2: H1 is awarded across the university at 80+. Eleven universities were in this category.

Category 3: H1 grades vary between faculties. Five universities were in this category, one of which had grade variation within its faculties as well.

The documentation provided by the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee in 2002 did not give figures for the number of honours degrees awarded in any of the years it canvassed, but it did give a fifty-page printout of numbers of honours graduates, with no analysis or breakdown of the figures in particular universities or the level of honours achieved. What that document did indicate was a 12% increase in graduates going from honours degrees to higher research degrees between 1992 and 2001, suggesting that the relevance of honours in relation to APAs and APAIs research project funding was a salient consideration in outcomes for graduates with honours degrees. After this document, little relevant material is available. 2010 figures do indicate, though, that in 2009 there were 44,292 Doctor by Research (which includes PhD and Professional Doctorate) enrollments and 16,708 in Bachelor's Honours degrees (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations).

TOWARD A STANDARD QUALITY FRAMEWORK

Our previous review, in 2008, of universities' honours programs across rural, regional, and urban Australia indicated variation in the programs we canvassed (Zeegers & Barron). We saw that honours was localised and that there was a lack of consistency in application of policies or procedures in the implementation of honours programs. The conduct of honours programs has been very much a given aspect of undergraduate programs but has enjoyed a privileged position within academia, especially in awarding of research scholarships.

We examined universities' statements on honours programs, which indicated a tacit understanding that a dynamic honours program is the basis of a dynamic research culture within a university, an assumption that had been unquestioned since it was articulated in the 1957 Murray Report on Australian universities. In 2008, we did not question the role that honours may play within a university and its research culture, and we do not do so now, but we found that honours programs had not been singled out for attention by major organizations in the higher education field, and this situation continued until 2011. The AQF was established in 1995 to create a national system of qualifications but made no reference to honours. In 2011 the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) took over the AQF's role and specified details of requirements for higher education levels, with honours being classed as a Level 8 course: above Level 7 (bachelor's

degree) and equal with Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas. This classification is significant in that it deals with issues of the sort raised in our previous work.

A strength of TEQSA in relation to honours is that it explicitly addresses the lack of consistency and transparency as it pertains to research components understood to be features of honours degrees. TEQSA's aim is to establish consistency in degree quality and standards across the country so that honours students from any university would be qualified for postgraduate research programs in any other university in the country while at the same time providing a measure of consistency in the awarding of scholarships. TEQSA also anticipates that industry will be more informed about the types of skills and qualities that an honours graduate will bring to any positions they may take up.

TEQSA has moved to address the variations in honours graduates' skills and research standards, an important consideration when it comes to the relative standing of honours students applying for nationally competitive scholarships. What we would argue needs to change, but which has not been specifically addressed in the new TEQSA arrangements, is the historical disparity in what grade is required to be awarded an H1 in universities across Australia. Universities can make their own decisions on the minimum grade and not just follow the past definitions of H1s or H2s. There is the rider:

If a student does not hold a Bachelor degree with First Class Honours, then the HEP [Higher Education Provider] may determine that the student has demonstrated an equivalent level of academic attainment. In determining an equivalent level of academic attainment, a HEP may consider previous study, relevant work experience, research publications, referees' reports and other research experience. (DIISR, 2010, *Equivalent Attainment*)

A complicating factor is that the Australian government specifies that the equivalence applies only to H1 and not to H2 and that scholarships will be made available only to students with H1. This situation is still to be negotiated, if not actually resolved.

TEQSA has also moved to address questions that may be raised about the relative abilities of candidates to complete their higher research degrees, as required by the Research Training Scheme (RTS), which is the policy basis of postgraduate research programs in Australia whereby research students are constructed as trainees working with experts in the conduct of rigorous and trustworthy research. Honours may be seen as a program in which a potential doctoral student will approximate the research behaviours of more experienced researchers in a given field; in essence, it is research training. A

question remains: how to evaluate the equivalence of an H1 result to a Research Masters that has an ungraded pass.

The disparities that we have canvassed above have indicated that honours programs, even where they have been categorised and examined as discipline-specific, have shown disparities across universities and across various areas in the same universities in which they were offered. This situation has been addressed by TEQSA, on paper at least, and its benchmarking means that all applicants for higher research degrees may be considered equitably. Before the changes introduced in 2011, if applicants did not have an honours degree with an H1 grade, they would be judged against the sorts of criteria that were assumed to underpin an H1 grade, yet there was no evidence that an honours student who achieved an H1 had met those criteria. Universities that we investigated had no issue with demanding clear evidence of research-based activity in an honours equivalence case but accepted unquestioningly an assumption of a high level of research capacity associated with an H1 grade.

Indeed, universities had no problem setting criteria for non-honours graduates. The standard form that we found in the universities we examined had, and indeed still has, the heading *Honours Equivalence*, requiring that applicants make a case that they have engaged in research-based activities or that their professional practice has required them to engage in critical analysis and implementation of change as part of their professional activities. What TEQSA has done, then, is articulate the standards against which the criteria of an honours grade will be measured. What is more, the purpose, knowledge, and skills as well as the application of knowledge and skills, while being specified by TEQSA, have an additional “volume of learning” dimension, a set of specifications that has been lacking. We would suggest, then, a simpler approach of awarding scholarships on the basis of grade-point achievement, according to standards that have been established and articulated by TEQSA, and scrapping the entire nomenclature of H1, H2, and so on.

THE NUMBERS

In 2008, 7,174 students completed a higher degree by research (HDR), an increase of 41% since 1998 (DIISR, 2009). In 2011, the government supported 3,270 commencing APAs and at the same time announced that, in 2012, this number would be increased to 3,500 (DIISR, 2011). Of all entrants to higher degrees by research, 20.4% are honours graduates, with 16.2% entering via other postgraduate courses, e.g., master’s degrees (DIISR, 2011). The rise in the numbers taking up established honours pathways to research degrees, compared with possibilities open to students via master’s degrees, for example, may show that honours is more attractive in that it gives a

competitive edge in the award of scholarships. Honours is one point in the possible pathways to higher research degrees where an undergraduate degree (a bachelor's degree with honours) outranks a postgraduate degree (a master's). The honours pathway is also one that, while it has important implications for research higher degrees, is beyond the scope of any possible monitoring protocols by deans of graduate studies. One such dean we interviewed acknowledged the implied link between honours and the activities of his own research and graduate studies office but also pointed out that any monitoring of honours programs within his university occurred within faculty protocols and practices. This dimension of honours protocols and procedures remains unchanged in spite of the changes wrought by TEQSA.

An expectation of bachelor's graduates is that they have practical and professional competencies in their chosen field. An honours graduate, though, may be expected to have at least advanced enquiry skills and at most a demonstrated capacity for undertaking research to generate new knowledge or to use existing knowledge in new ways. Such an expectation, though, is not supported by evidence; it is, rather, simply a conventional assumption within Australian universities. As a pathway into higher research degrees, honours is claimed by universities to provide an opportunity, first of all, to approximate the research behaviours of those who have led the field in research activities, to learn the protocols involved, and to come to the understanding that, like Einstein, the honours student is standing on the shoulders of giants. Second of all, honours enables research students to make an authentic contribution to the world's store of knowledge by virtue of their engagement with authentic research activities. We argue that these tacit understandings, of the sort that Murray took up in his discussion of honours in Australian universities, need to be foregrounded and reviewed in current RTS contexts that are so much a part of twenty-first-century research activities in Australian universities.

If Australian universities value research, as they are required to do by the funding bodies that support their activities, they cannot with any sort of justification focus only on the vocational features of honours programs. By vocational features we mean the practical competencies associated with particular careers or professions rather than the skills associated with enquiry and scholarship. The research components of honours programs have in recent years received legislative attention that, we suggest, has created a policy climate in which Australian universities may now implement even further innovation to strengthen the position of honours as part of the research pathways in Australian universities.

THE STRENGTHS OF AQF IN THE POLICY DOMAIN

Policy is now in place to align universities' activities with national expectations for honours graduates. This policy provides a mechanism for eliminating the sort of variation that we have observed in universities across the country, especially in awarding APAs and APAIs. The awards of PhD, Professional Doctorate, and Masters by Research degrees are now underpinned by established conventions of examinations by scholars of national and international repute in their disciplinary areas. We have not found a similar underpinning of honours programs; we have instead found variations across and within faculties even when it comes to the examination of honours theses. The TEQSA position, though, now means that it has been possible to establish a national and nationally consistent standard for honours similar to that used in higher research degrees.

Honours graduates may or may not want to go on to pursue a research program. They may instead wish to take advanced skills into the workplace they have chosen as part of their own career paths, which raises the question of just what these advanced skills may be: vocational skills, critical thinking, analytical skills, and so on. Defining the standards for providing vocational training in honours will require a different process than defining standards for preparing students to do significant research. Our argument is that the latter standards need to be scrutinised in terms of policy and administrative behaviour given their implications for awarding APAs and APAIs.

CONCLUSION

We have given an historical account of the position of honours in Australian universities. We have mapped a number of assumptions that Australian universities have taken for granted in relation to their honours programs. We have shown that, prior to 2011, governing bodies and universities themselves had been inattentive to the role, content, and grading of honours. At the same time, there was an unexamined assumption that honours was the foundation for entry to research higher degree programs, an assumption that was not necessarily supported by the situation on campuses across the country. Universities, as self-accrediting bodies, had been able to operate in isolation, unaccountable to each other as far as honours or indeed their entire undergraduate programs were concerned. This inattentiveness was evident in the policy drought associated with bodies such as the AVCC and AQF which, in their advisory roles, had not singled out honours for particular consideration over the years. Honours suffered as this situation continued.

HONOURS IN AUSTRALIA

We see the new policy and its implementation in 2012 as a major step in addressing discrepancies, providing a guide to universities as they address assumptions upon which are based the awarding of scholarships for post-graduate research within vibrant research cultures. Honours programs are now open to public scrutiny, the sort of scrutiny which had been absent since 1957.

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