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# Qualities Honours Students Look for in Faculty and Courses, Revisited

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*[Editor's note: What follows is an updated revision of an essay published by Marca V. C. Wolfensberger in JNCHC 5.2 (fall/winter 2004): 55–66.]*

## INTRODUCTION

In the eight years since the original version of this study was published, a lot has changed in the Dutch honours landscape. Stimulated by governmental measures, many new honours programmes were—and are being—developed, not only within academic universities but now also in more than half of the universities of applied sciences (UAS) (Wolfensberger, Jong & Drayer). Honours programmes, which we define as programmes that are specifically developed to offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than regular programmes, are recognized as one of the primary means to evoke excellence in talented students. They are meant for the more motivated and gifted students who want more and have the capacity to do more than the regular curriculum requires from them.

Although the body of knowledge is increasing, our insight into effective honours programmes has not developed at the same pace as has the number of honours programmes. For example, we need specified and *a priori* defined outcomes in order to evaluate the success of honours programmes. We also need to make explicit our assumptions about the needs of students, faculty, and society that honours programmes are said to meet. Our ways of evoking excellence in students through honours programmes is in need of a theoretical underpinning. Fundamental to our understanding of effective honours programmes is the need for clearer insight into the features of students participating in honours programmes. Who are those talented and motivated students who are able to do more than the regular programme can offer them? What kind of programme will challenge those students?

Honours programmes are now widely offered to talented students in the Netherlands with the assumption that those talented students will be broadly alike. Honours students are commonly considered to be clever, high-achieving, full of potential, and intrinsically motivated. Most honours programmes have admission procedures separate from those of their host university, and the existence of these procedures suggests that a relevant and accurate distinction between honours and non-honours students can be made. What we need to explore is the kind of peers, teachers, courses, and programs that this special category of students—honours students—look for and need in their education.

## LEARNING CONTEXT

The reasons for designing honours programmes and offering this special education may be diverse. An honours programme may be a marketing device, an instrument for helping students to achieve a high profile, a strategy for coping with a diversified student population, a remedy to retain talented students and faculty, or a laboratory for innovations. We think that, whatever the reason, honours programmes should motivate students in a way that engenders commitment, effort, wisdom, and high-quality performance. We would suggest, supported by the views of Ryan & Deci, that we should therefore look for an educational context that supports the growth of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The idea that those three traits predict “integrated motivation” and intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci 73), which in turn predict study behavior, has been confirmed by many studies (see overview in Ryan & Deci; also Martens & Kirschner). Autonomy means, for instance, that students have freedom of choice concerning their goals and plan making. Focus on competence indicates that it is important that students have the feeling they are learning, achieving excellence, and making a difference. Relatedness corresponds with a safe learning environment or honours community where the faculty is personally involved and peers are to be trusted. Creating a learning context that supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness thus enhances motivation and fosters the internalization and integration of knowledge, ideas, and skills. We assume that this context is what honours students are looking for, but we need to develop a better, empirically based understanding of what honours students seek and need in faculty and courses. This understanding will allow us to identify the key factors of successful honours programmes.

Do honours students assess teachers and courses differently than do non-honours students? What motivates students to take part in honours? What are their opinions about education (teachers, fellow-students, courses), and what do they value as important qualities? What forms of excellence do they

pursue in honours activities? If honours students are different from non-honours students, should these differences necessitate curricular, pedagogical, or personal coaching changes in academic programming? We have a lot of questions to answer in order to design honours programmes that are appropriate for all key stakeholders: students, faculty, institutions, and society. The main research questions that we will try to answer in this article are:

- What are characteristics of honours students and how do they value teachers and courses?
- Are possible differences constant over time and consistent across (types of) universities?
- Does our theory-based learning context, which is supportive of autonomy, academic competence, and relatedness through an honours community, actually correspond with the preferences of our honours students?

Most of the research on honours programmes has taken place in the U.S. with its longstanding tradition of such programmes, but even in the U.S. empirical research on students' motivations, attitudes, and achievements is scarce. Long & Lange wrote that “[H]onors students and programs would be better served if there were an available body of scientific knowledge from which programmatic decisions could be made” (21). We have not seen any significant shift and growth in research; the body of available U.S. research on the characteristics of honours students typically focuses on their personality profiles, their previous academic achievement, or their social activities or volunteer work; it rarely focuses on “throughput” or added value: what students actually expect from and do in honours programmes (Clark; Gerrity *et al.*; Harte; Rinn & Plucker; Shushok). A question also remains whether U.S. results can be transferred to a European national context, where the culture and the higher education system are different.

## METHODS

Given the lack of empirical research, we started with a pilot study. We designed an exploratory study to investigate differences that might exist between honours and non-honours. Our questionnaire was based on outcomes of some studies in the United States so that we would have something to which we could compare our outcomes (Baur; Gerrity *et al.*; Harte; Shushok; Rinn & Plucker; Long & Lange); it also contained questions based on Dutch (anecdotal) information (among others: evaluation reports; van Eijl *et al.*; Wolfensberger, van Eijl, & Pilot). The main idea was to get a first impression whether there are differences between honours and non-honours students in the Netherlands and therefore whether it is worthwhile to go on with research on honours students and their outcomes.

## QUALITIES HONOURS STUDENTS LOOK FOR IN FACULTY AND COURSES

The present paper strives to validate and expand some of the outcomes of the 2004 article. Since the pilot study, modified versions of the original questionnaire were administered to honours and non-honours students from different fields and universities on several occasions (see Table 1). In total, 1,451 students from two academic and one applied university were questioned. For the pilot, two different honours programmes from the two largest research universities were chosen as examples of common types of honours programmes in the Netherlands: a disciplinary honours programme at Utrecht University and an interdisciplinary honours programme at the University of Amsterdam.

As stated in other research (van Eijl, Wolfensberger, et al.; Wolfensberger, van Eijl et al.), we can divide honours in the Netherlands into

**Table 1. Number of Respondents by University, Type of Programme and Survey Period**

University	H(onours) or N(on-Honours)	Type of Honours Programme	2003–2004 (pilot)	2005–2007	2010–2011
University of Amsterdam	H	Interdisciplinary	45	84	–
University of Amsterdam	N		85	–	–
Utrecht University	H	Disciplinary*	12	37	–
		Disciplinary, Multidisciplinary	–	–	187
Utrecht University	N		128	326	205
Hanze UAS Groningen	H	Combination of Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary	–	–	152
Hanze UAS Groningen	N		–	–	179
<b>Totals</b>			<b>270</b>	<b>447</b>	<b>734**</b>

\* Human Geography and Planning;

\*\* Of these, for 11 students either their university or their participation in an honours programme or both is unclear.

roughly three organizational categories: disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary honours programmes. The first is organized and paid for by a department with a focus on one discipline. Interdisciplinary honours programmes are generally organized and paid for by the university. Students, like the faculty, come from all departments of the university, and they meet only in honours. Recently combinations of these types of programmes are being developed. Finally, multidisciplinary honours programmes bear strong similarities to liberal arts and sciences honours colleges in the United States.

In the pilot that we conducted in 2003–2004, we included 3 populations and 1 stratified sample, resulting in a total of 270 useful questionnaires. From the interdisciplinary honours programme at the University of Amsterdam, the whole population filled in a questionnaire (45 out of 48 participants). As a matching group from this university, we took a stratified sample from the disciplines. A total of 85 students filled in the questionnaire during various courses. The honours population of the disciplinary programme Human Geography and Planning of the Faculty of Geoscience at University of Utrecht consisted of 13 students, 12 of whom filled in the questionnaire. We then asked all 128 first-year students in Human Geography and Planning (a third, matching population) present during an obligatory course to fill in the questionnaire. First-year honours students were not included in this population. Similar procedures were followed subsequently at the same universities in Amsterdam and Utrecht in 2005–2007 and at Utrecht University and the Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen in 2010–2011.

The pilot questionnaire consisted mostly of closed questions, focusing on students' opinions of fellow students, teachers, courses, general life attitudes, and socioeconomic background. Also, some questions dealt with study and classroom behaviour, such as how often students asked questions during courses and if and how often they had informal contact with faculty. Students were asked to evaluate qualities of fellow students, teachers, and courses respectively on a simple 1 to 5 scale (1 = very important; 5 = totally unimportant). Additionally, honours students were asked to rank the three most important reasons (from a list) that they had decided to take part in the honours programme.

In the 2005–2007 version of the questionnaire, modifications were made to the pilot version. Some items were slightly rephrased, others were added. In 2010–2011 a shortened version containing 13 questions about teachers only was administered as part of a larger questionnaire for another study. The five (almost) identical questions about teachers that were part of all three data collections are the subject of our new analyses.

We used regular statistical methods for the analyses, especially Pearson Chi-Square, Cramer's V. We also gave the means of scores on the 1–5 scale.

Although this methodology is perhaps not fully correct, the means help present the results in a straightforward manner. In this paper, a result that is statistically significant refers to a confidence level of 95% ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). We compared all honours students versus all non-honours students and—with regard to the pilot—did the statistics for the two programmes separately (in other words, interdisciplinary honours versus non-honours students of the University of Amsterdam and disciplinary honours versus non-honours students in Human Geography and Planning at the University of Utrecht).

## **RESULTS OF THE PILOT STUDY: HONOURS STUDENTS VERSUS NON-HONOURS STUDENTS**

The honours students, being asked to rate qualities of faculty and courses on a scale of 1 (very important) to 5 (totally unimportant), answered as follows: most important is that the teachers be inspiring (1.5), that courses fit in with their personal interests (1.5), that courses be challenging (1.6), that courses awaken their curiosity (1.8), that teachers be friendly (2.0), and that the reading materials be interesting (2.0). Honours students rated highly that teachers teach in a clear and structured way (1.5) and that they have clear criteria for what they want from students (1.7).

The top five highest scores of non-honours students indicated different priorities. They valued none of the given items as very important (score of 1), so the means are mostly higher than 2, with the exception of the importance given to clear and structured teaching and to clear criteria (resp. 1.5; 1.5). Otherwise, the top five characteristics preferred by the non-honours students were that the courses fit in with their personal interests (1.8), that study tasks are clearly structured (1.9), that teachers inspire them (2.0), that courses challenge them (2.0), and that the reading materials are interesting (2.1). Our new data confirm these differences with a relatively strong emphasis that honours students put on the awakening of their curiosity and—as we will see in more detail—non-honours students' demand for clearly structured study tasks.

The five highest scoring items for the honours students had to do with inherent enjoyment and indicated internal motivation. They fit with a learning context focused on relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Our findings largely correspond with Stephens and Eison, who in 1987 reported that honours students showed more intrinsic interest in learning and less in grades. Our study indicated that honours students also were not as concerned that a course be important for their career (3.0 versus 2.4 in the control group of the pilot study and 2.9 versus 2.2 in 2005–2007), and they seemed to care less about study load

In our research, honours students had a higher average score on the items that relate to intrinsic motivation and a lower average score on the items that relate to extrinsic motivation; the pilot study's control group also scored intrinsic motivation higher than extrinsic motivation but not as markedly as for the honours group.

Our data show that honours students not only seem more curious but also ask more questions during courses than non-honours students (Cramer's  $V=3.1$ ). Almost half of the honours students in the pilot study claimed to ask questions often during courses while 84% of all non-honours students said that they either never or only occasionally asked questions during courses. On average honours students scored 2.5 on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (very often) versus 2.1 for non-honours students. Our newer data (2005–2007) confirm this difference: 2.1 for honours versus 1.9 for non-honours students.

Results of the current study seem to agree with claims by Gerrity *et al.* and Robertson that honours students expect their classes to be exciting and stimulating. Gerrity links this expectation to the family backgrounds of honours students, among other factors. More honours students' parents tend to have undergraduate and graduate degrees. Our study does not indicate this difference because only some of our questions were related to family background. More questions about personal attitude and background would be required for further investigation.

## TEACHER AND COURSE QUALITIES

The differences between honours students and students in the control groups are also pronounced in how the students value the five qualities that were part of all three data collections. Tables 2, 3, and 4 show that honours students place higher value on having teachers who are demanding, challenging, and inspiring than non-honours students; the effect sizes for "demanding" and "challenging" are around 0.5, which is substantial. Non-honours students have a stronger preference for clarity regarding study tasks and criteria (see Tables 5 and 6). All five differences between honours and non-honours students are visible within all three data collections, i.e. throughout the years and in different educational contexts (types of honours programme, type of university). Further, honours students find it much less important than non-honours students that courses are useful for their profession or career (pilot: 3.1 versus 2.4; 2.8 versus 2.2 in 2005–2007; not in 2010–2011). Honours students put more emphasis on courses raising questions they never thought of before, or bringing new ideas to mind than non-honours students.

**Table 2. Mean Scores of Honours Versus Non-Honours Students on ‘That They [Teachers] Are Demanding’**

	2003–2004	2005–2007	2010–2011
Honours	2.4	2.3	2.4
Non-Honours	2.8	2.8	2.6

(1 = very important, 5 = totally unimportant)

**Table 3. Mean Scores of Honours Versus Non-Honours Students on ‘That Teachers Challenge Me’.**

	2003–2004	2005–2007	2010–2011
Honours	1.6	2.1	1.8
Non-Honours	2.0	2.6	2.1

(1 = very important, 5 = totally unimportant)

**Table 4. Mean scores of Scores of Honours Versus Non-Honours Students on ‘That They [Teachers] Inspire Me’**

	2003–2004	2005–2007	2010–2011
Honours	1.5	1.8	1.6
Non-Honours	2.0	2.0	1.7

(1 = very important, 5 = totally unimportant)

**Table 5. Mean Scores of Honours Versus Non-Honours Students on ‘That Study Tasks Are Clearly Structured/Explained’**

	2003–2004	2005–2007	2010–2011
Honours	2.5	2.3	1.9
Non-Honours	1.9	1.9	1.8

(1 = very important, 5 = totally unimportant)

**Table 6. Mean Scores of Honours Versus Non-Honours Students on ‘That They Have Clear Criteria for What They Want from Me’**

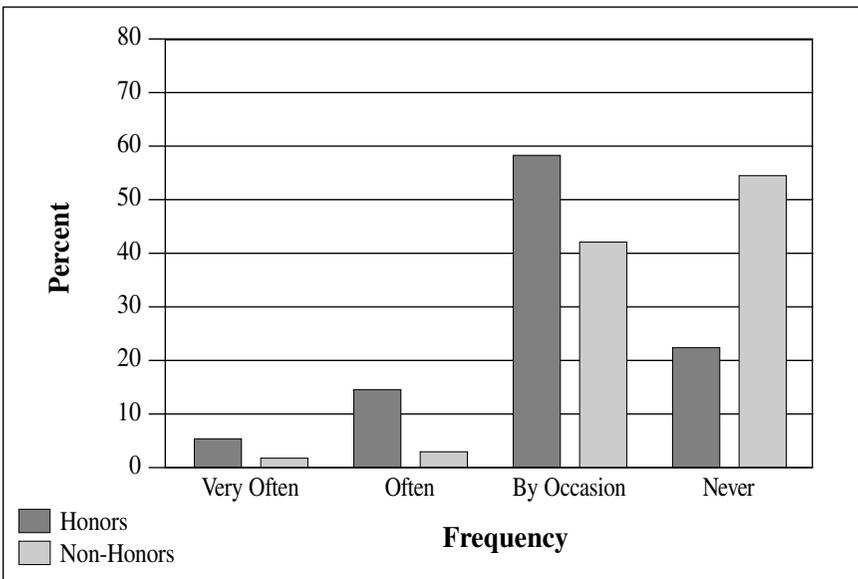
	2003–2004	2005–2007	2010–2011
Honours	1.8	1.9	1.7
Non-Honours	1.6	1.8	1.5

(1 = very important, 5 = totally unimportant)

Our results further indicate that honours students appreciate relatedness. When we asked, “How often did you have social contacts with a teacher/faculty member outside class this last year?,” honours students indicated significantly more social contact with teachers than non-honours (Cramer’s  $V=0.326$ ). More than half of the non-honours students (53%) never had social contact with faculty while only 4% often or very often do. Of the honours students, 22% never had social contact with faculty, and 21% had frequent or very frequent social contact (see Figure 1). However, there were also differences between the two honours programmes that might relate to organizational structure. A quarter of the interdisciplinary honours students never had social contacts with faculty versus 10% of the disciplinary honours, findings that confirm Baur’s observation that when honours students had seen “one another in more than one class, [they] had more opportunities to form meaningful social ties within the academic sphere than was true of other students” (295).

Inspired by Gerrity’s findings in 1993 that honours students are more interested than non-honours students in nonacademic activities, we asked students about their participation level in extracurricular activities organized by the department or university, but we did not find any significant correlation. Our research does not indicate that honours students participate more in extracurricular activities. Maybe the differences between our findings and Gerrity’s can be explained by cultural differences and by differences in higher

**Figure 1. Frequency of Social Contact with Faculty**



education. More research on cultural differences with regard to gifted students is needed like that of Peters, who found that academic self-concept is more correlated with intelligence in the Netherlands than in a Chinese sample. It would be worthwhile to repeat our research in an American setting, but, since some phenomena may display themselves differently in different cultural environments, we might also need different ways of investigating.

## THE CHOICE OF HONOURS

The overall impression derived from our study is that honours students' evaluation of their academic environment indicates a high level of intrinsic motivation. The high grades that they attain are not driven by career orientation (extrinsic motivation). Honours students appear to be interested in the subject, in asking new questions, in new knowledge. This impression is reinforced by 60% of their responses to why they take part in the honours programme, which include "getting a deeper and broader knowledge and understanding," "learning to think critically," and "having more intellectual challenge." Also, the community of their peer honours students appears to be an important reason for joining an honours programme. External reasons, such as better qualification for graduate school or career, are of little to no importance.

## CONCLUSION

Our research indicates differences between honours and non-honours students in the value that they place on specific qualities of teachers and courses. A learning context that is supportive of relatedness, provides freedom, and encourages academic competence seems to fit honours students well. These findings could help us formulate some pedagogical and curricular changes in academic programming. A mentoring relationship with faculty members—thus fostering relationships—could be part of this honours pedagogy. When faculty members are personally involved, they transfer their attitudes and values along with their knowledge. Teachers can then become role models of scholarly leaders who have the courage to synthesize wisdom, intelligence, and creativity. Since honours students appreciate freedom, courses designed to suit their personal interests are advisable. They like demanding teachers and challenging courses that enlarge their competence without promoting competition; external outcomes seem to be irrelevant to them.

We hope to see similar research on students participating in honours programmes in the United States and other countries so that we can join forces in designing honours programmes that engender commitment, effort, wisdom, creativity, and high-quality performance. Such programmes, as described elsewhere in this issue of *JNCHC*, can have strong spin-off effects

on the regular curriculum and on the whole institution, ultimately allowing us to send off graduates who are willing and able to make a meaningful difference in the world.

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