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Qualities Honours Students Look for in Faculty and Courses

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ABSTRACT

The main research questions that we answer in this article are: What are characteristics of honours students and how do they value teachers and courses? Does our theory-based learning context, which is supportive of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, actually correspond to the preferences of our honours students?

Talent, selectiveness, and differentiation are quickly becoming buzzwords in higher education policy and practice in the Netherlands. Honours programmes are recognized as one of the primary means to evoke excellence in talented students. Nearly all thirteen Dutch research universities have or are developing honours programmes; the first honours programme in the Netherlands started as recently as 1993. We expect that, while European countries are implementing the bachelor-master system, honours programmes will rapidly spread across Europe during the coming years. We define honours programmes as programmes that are specifically developed to offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than the regular programmes. 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.

Our knowledge of and insight into effective honours programmes has, unfortunately, not quite developed at the same pace as have 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, we need to gain a 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 those talented students will be broadly alike.

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Honours students are commonly considered to be clever, high achieving, full of potential, and intrinsically motivated. There is, however, remarkably little research that underpins all these assumptions. Most honours programmes have admission procedures separate from those of their host university. The existence of these procedures suggests that a relevant and accurate distinction between honours and non-honours students can be made. Often, the primary selection criterion is the GPA. All we know for sure is that honours students are able to get high grades. They won't be dumb.

SELECTION

In the Netherlands, until recently, there have been no honours programmes that select only by GPA. They commonly used freestanding honors applications as explained by Stoller (2004). Selection commissions looked beyond grades and motivation played an important role (Wolfensberger, 2004). However, the transition to the Bologna-system (bachelor and master structure) has been accompanied by intensive debates about 'selectivity,' talent scouting, and differentiation (Balkenende, 2003; Vaart & Wolfensberger, 2004). Admission commissions for honours programmes or selective 'research master' programmes are now looking for quick answers and selection procedures. More and more the GPA is being considered the clear and appropriate selection criterion. Students in general are gradually becoming more aware of the potential importance of good grades as well, especially when follow-up opportunities at the masters and PhD level are taken into consideration.

I would argue that we are in need of empirical analyses of the effectiveness of different forms of selection. We need to relate the applied criteria in selection procedures to actual student outcomes in terms of study speed, motivation, and quality of student work and to the spin-off effects on the regular programme. And, in line with Stoller (2004), we should not forget to tie our choice of selection model to the characteristics, visions, goals, and mandates of our honours programmes. Assuming that we are looking for students who are the gifted leaders and famous researchers of tomorrow, I would argue that selection procedures for honours programmes should identify students who are not only talented but also most willing to learn how to translate this talent into actions that have a meaningful impact on the world. So we should look for individuals who are gifted in terms of abilities and expert in terms of achievements. This point of view is inspired by, among others, the ideas of Sternberg concerning giftedness and leadership (Sternberg, 2003 & 2004). He argues that a gifted and successful leader "decides to synthesize wisdom, intelligence, and creativity" (Sternberg, 2004, p .30). My perspective is aligned with the abiding concern of Smith with the normative, with professional ethics, and with the "role of scholarship in seeking to identify and create a better world" (Smith, 2004, p. 284), not just with high grades.

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 keep talented students and faculty, or a laboratory for innovations. I think that, whatever the reason, honours programmes should motivate students in a way that engenders commitment, effort, wisdom, and high-quality performance. I would suggest, supported by the views of Ryan & Deci (2000), that this means that we should look for an educational context that supports the growth of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The idea that those three traits predict intrinsic motivation and integrated extrinsic motivation,¹ which in turn predict study behavior, has been confirmed by many studies (see Ryan & Deci, 2000 for an overview; Martens & Kirschner, 2004). 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, making a difference. Relatedness corresponds with a safe learning environment. The faculty is personally involved, and peers are to be trusted. Thus, creating a learning context that supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness will enhance motivation and foster the internalization and integration of knowledge, ideas, and skills. Having said all this, we should know whether this is also the context honours students are looking for. Since students are those with whom we teach and learn, it is important that we develop a better and empirically based understanding of the quality honours students are looking for 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?
- Does our theory-based learning context, which is supportive of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, actually correspond with the preferences of our honours students?

¹ Ryan and Deci (2000, p.73) claim “integration occurs when identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one’s other values and needs. Actions characterized by integrated motivation share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, although they are still considered extrinsic because they are done to attain separable outcomes rather than for their inherent enjoyment.”

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Most of the research on honours programmes has taken place in the USA with its longstanding tradition of such programmes, but even in the USA empirical research on students' motivations, attitudes, and achievements is scarce. Long & Lange (2002, p. 21) 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." We have not seen any shift and growth in research; the body of available US research on the characteristics of honour students 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 (for instance Clark, 2000; Gerrity *et al.*, 1993; Harte, 1994; Rinn, in review; Shushok, 2002). And the question remains whether US results can be transferred to any 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, 1969; Gerrity *et al.*, 1993; Harte, 1994; Shushok, 2002; Rinn & Plucker, in review, Long, 2002); it also contained questions based on Dutch anecdotal information (among others: evaluation reports; Eijl *et al.*, 2004; Wolfensberger, 2004). 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. Also we wanted to find out to what extent the research results on honours in the United States and the Netherlands would be comparable.

We have chosen two different honours programmes from the two largest research universities as examples of two 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 (Eijl, 2003; Wolfensberger, 2004), we can divide honours in the Netherlands into 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 come from all departments of the university, like the faculty. They meet only in honours. Recently combinations of these types of programmes are being developed. Multidisciplinary honours programmes bear strong similarities to liberal arts and science honours colleges in the United States.

In this research we included 3 populations and 1 stratified sample. This resulted in a total of 270 useful questionnaires. From the interdisciplinary honours programme from 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. We controlled for gender and discipline: male and female students were equally represented; science students were slightly more represented in the sample. The honours population of the disciplinary programme Human Geography and Planning of the Faculty of Geoscience at University of Utrecht consists 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. We administered the questionnaires during the week of June 20-22, 2004.

The questionnaire consisted of 34 multiple choice/closed questions and 3 open questions. The questions focused on students' opinions of fellow students, teachers, courses, general life attitudes, and social-economic 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 20 qualities of fellow students, teachers, and courses respectively on a simple 1 to 5 scale (1=extremely important; 5= completely 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. We evaluated the questions afterwards with some of the respondents, and some questions appeared to be ambiguous and are not included in the analyses.

We used regular statistical methods for the analyses, especially Pearson Chi-Square, Cramer's V. We also give the means of scores on the 1-5 scale. Although this is not methodologically fully correct, the means help to present the results in a straightforward manner. In this paper, a correlation 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 we did the statistics for the two programmes separately (in other words, interdisciplinary honours students versus non-honours of the University of Amsterdam and disciplinary honours versus non-honours students in Human Geography and Planning at the University of Utrecht).

RESULTS: HONOURS STUDENTS VERSUS NON-HONOURS STUDENTS

Coming back to our main concern, what are the characteristics of honours students and how do they value teachers and courses? Does a learning context that supports (the growth of) autonomy, competence, and relatedness actually correspond to the preferences of our honours students? Let us look at some of the research results.

The honours students, being asked to rate qualities of fellow students, faculty, and courses on a scale of 1 (extremely important) to 5 (extremely unimportant), answer as follows: the qualities that honours students consider most important are that the teachers be inspiring (1.6), that courses fit in with their personal interests (1.6), that courses be challenging (1.6), that courses awaken their curiosity (1.8), and lastly that the reading materials be interesting (1.9). Besides these characteristics, honours students value some basic qualities of teachers as important, namely that

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teachers teach in a clear and structured way (1.5; 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 indicate different priorities. Firstly, they value none of the given items as extremely important (score of 1). So the means are mostly higher than 2, with the exception of the importance given to basic teaching qualities, namely clear and structured teaching and having clear criteria (resp. 1.5; 1.5; 1.5). Besides those, the top five characteristics preferred by the non-honours students are: that the courses fit 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 be interesting (2.1).

When we look at the lowest scores—what students think to be less important—we also see some differences between honours and non-honours students. For the honours students the following items are not so important: that the study load not be too heavy (3.3), that the courses be important to their career (3.0), that they earn a high grade (2.9), that the study tasks be clearly structured (2.6). The non-honours control group value as relatively unimportant that teachers be demanding (2.8), that they earn a high grade (2.8), that the study load not be too heavy (2.7).

The five highest scoring items for the honours students have to do with inherent enjoyment and indicate internal motivation. They fit with a learning context focused on relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Our findings largely correspond with Stephens and Eison (1987) who report that honours students show more intrinsic interest in learning and less in grades. They also don't think it is important that a course be important for their carrier (3.0 versus 2.4 for the control group), and they seem to care less about study load. We do not know whether this is because they have plenty of time or they do not mind to working more. Further investigation of time management is warranted (also stated by Gerrity *et al.*, 1993, p. 50).

In our research, honours students have 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. Please note that for the control group intrinsic motivation also scores better than extrinsic motivation but not as markedly as for the honours group.

According to the above, honours students seem to be more curious than non-honours students. Do they ask more questions during courses? Yes, honours students do appear to ask more questions during courses than non-honours students (Cramer's $V=3.1$). Almost half of all honours students claim to ask questions often during courses while 84% of all non-honours students say that they either never or only occasionally ask questions during courses.

Results of the current study seem to agree with Gerrity *et al.* (1993) and Robertson's (1966) claim 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 tended 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.

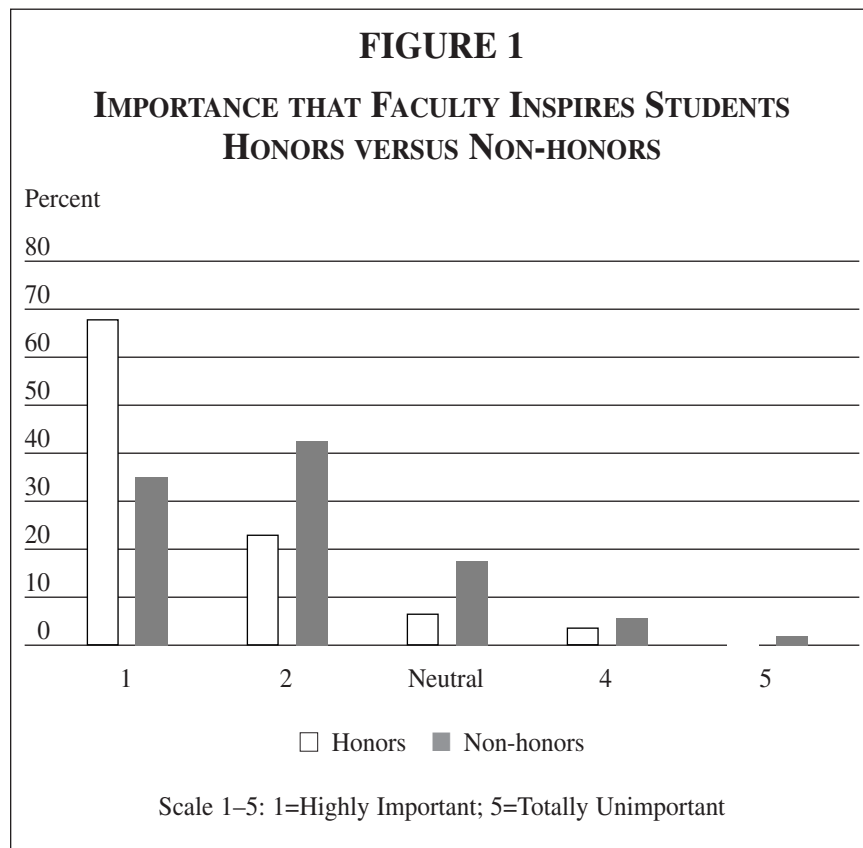
Our findings indicate that honours students seem to be more intrinsically motivated and more curious than non-honours students. Honours students value

inspiration, challenge, and relationship to their own interests as more important than their non-honours fellows do.

TEACHERS' QUALITIES

The difference between honours students and students in the control group is also pronounced in how the students value two teacher qualities: that teachers be inspiring (1.5 versus 2.0) and that they be demanding (2.4 versus 2.8 for control group).

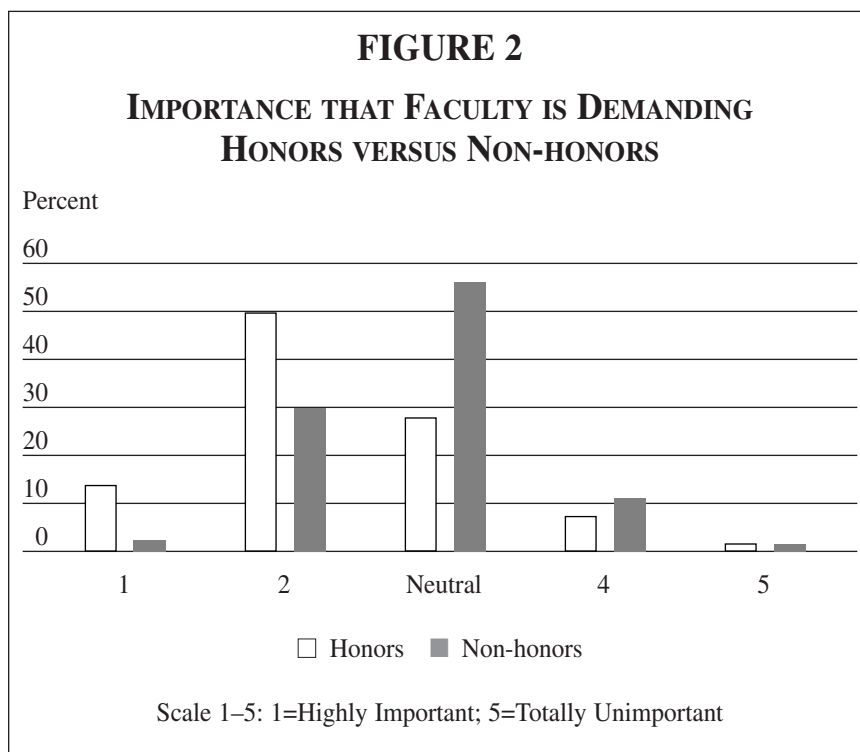
Honours students (67%) value it as very important that teacher be inspiring; only a third of the non-honours students value this as very important. This correlation is also significant (Cramer's $V=0.28$). The difference is illustrated in Figure 1.



Honours students appreciate it when a teacher is demanding: 63% of the honours students value this as very important versus 33% of the non-honours (Cramer's $V=0.28$) (see Figure 2). Accessibility of faculty does not seem to be an issue (mean 2.3

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for both groups), but, when we look more closely, an interesting difference between the two honours programmes appears.² The interdisciplinary honours students of Amsterdam do not value accessibility very highly (2.4 versus 2.2 for non-honours of Amsterdam). For the disciplinary honours students, by contrast, accessibility of faculty is much more important (1.8 versus 2.4 for first-year students at the Faculty of Geoscience).

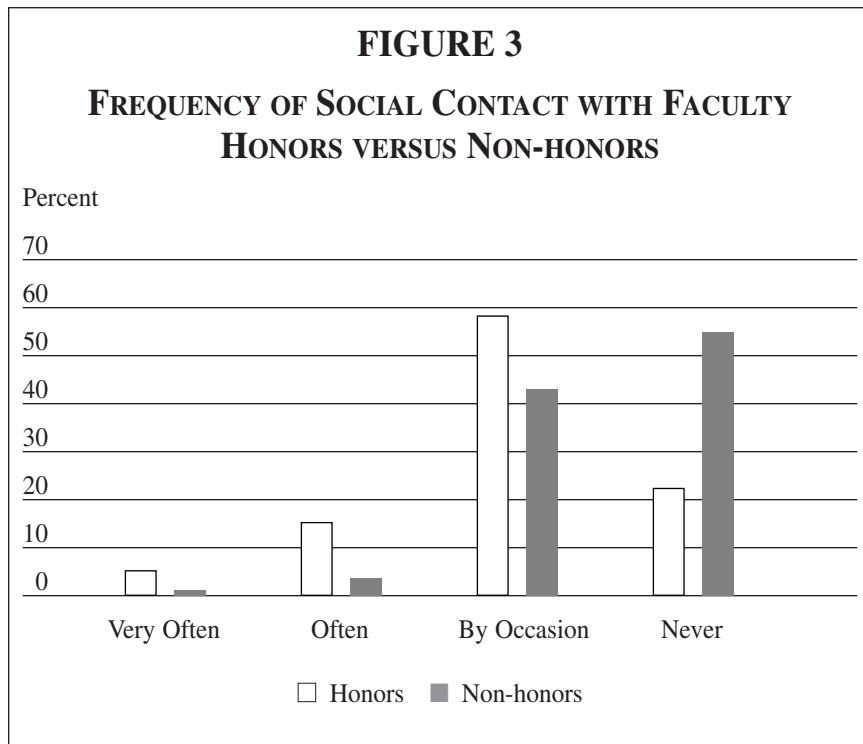


The results indicate that honours students appreciate relatedness. Do they experience this relatedness with faculty? We asked whether students have social contact with faculty outside the classroom.³ The answer appears to be yes: honours students have significantly more social contact with teachers than non-honours (Cramer's $V=0.326$). More than half of the non-honours students (53%) never have social contact with faculty while only 4% often or very often do. Of the honours students 22% never have social contact with faculty, and 21% often or very have often social contact (see Figure 3). Maybe the organizational structure discounts social contact: there are differences between the two honours programmes.

² The question is: How important is it for you that you can ask questions to faculty outside classroom? 1= very important up to 5= not important at all.

³ The question is: How often did you have social contacts with a teacher/faculty outside class this last year? 1=never up to 4=very often.

A quarter of the interdisciplinary honours students never have social contacts with faculty versus a small 10% of the disciplinary honours. This coincides with the findings of Baur (1969, p. 295) that when they had seen “one another in more than one class, honors students had more opportunities to form meaningful social ties within the academic sphere than was true of other students.”



As Gerrity’s study (1993) showed that honours students are more interested than non-honors in nonacademic activities, we asked students about their participation level in extracurricular activities organized by the department or university. After all, this kind of participation also counts as more social contact. We did not find any significant correlation. In our research, honours students do not participate more in extracurricular activities. Maybe those differences in findings can be explained by cultural differences and by differences in higher education. More research on cultural differences with regard to gifted students is needed. For instance, Peters (1998) found that academic self-concept is more correlated with intelligence in the Dutch case than in a Chinese sample. It would be worthwhile to repeat our research in an American setting. But maybe some phenomena may display themselves differently in different cultural environments, so what may be required are different ways of investigating.

Honours students value more highly than non-honors students do that teachers inspire them, that faculty are friendly and accessible and open to questions. Honours

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students ask more questions during class. Honours students have more social contact with teachers than non-honours students do. These findings can be important aids in helping programmes select teachers and guide them in their honours teaching. A mentoring relationship could be a good part of effective honours pedagogy.

THE CHOICE OF HONOURS

The overall impression 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 their responses to why they take part in the honours programme. 'Getting a deeper and broader knowledge and understanding,' 'learning to think critically,' and 'having more intellectual challenge' are the reasons most frequently given.⁴ Also the community of their peer honours students appears to be important: "collaboration with other motivated students" is a reason given for joining honours programmes. External reasons such as better qualification for graduate school or career are of little to no importance.

CONCLUSION

This research indicates that there are differences between honours and non-honours students in the value that they place on specific qualities of teachers, fellow-students, and courses. A learning context that is supportive of relatedness, autonomy, and competence seems to fit honours students well. These findings could help us formulate some pedagogical and curricular changes in academic programming.

Honours students seem to seek faculty who inspire them. They appreciate friendly teachers who are accessible for questions and conversations after courses. A learning context that is supportive of relatedness between students and between students and faculty seems to match with the needs of honours students. A mentoring relation could be part of this honours pedagogy. When faculty is personally involved there can be a transfer of attitude and values along with knowledge. Teachers can then become role models of scholarly leaders who have the courage to synthesize wisdom, intelligence, and creativity.

Honours students appreciate freedom. They highly value courses that correspond with their own personal interests. Freedom of choice seems to be important. Honours students seem to have a strong internal drive, so a learning context supportive of autonomy seems to fit them well.

⁴ Out of all the answers given, these four categories explain 60% of the reasons for participation. To collaborate with other highly motivated students counts for another 10%. The other 30% of the answers was scattered over 9 other answer categories, and the following reasons for participation are almost irrelevant (1 to 2 students tick them): 'to be able to do more research,' 'to qualify better for a job,' 'to qualify better for a PhD job,' 'to qualify better for admission to a master programme,' 'to improve my study planning and efficiency,' 'to have a more personal contact with teachers.'

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Honours students are looking for challenging environments. They like demanding teachers and challenging courses. They need a context in which to show and enlarge their competence. This context should not be competitive, as external outcomes seem to be irrelevant to them.

Please note that we did not include pre- and post-admission research. Therefore we cannot tell if participation in the honours programme influences the answers honours students give.

The findings of this exploratory study illustrate some differences between honours and non-honours. We believe more research into this subject is worthwhile. We would suggest changing the ambiguous questions and adding some questions about personal attitude and family background. We would advise enlarging the sample and also adding students from the third type, the multidisciplinary honours programme. We based our questions partly on American research. In comparing our findings we found a diverse picture. More research on cultural differences with regard to honours students is needed.

It would be very interesting to undertake similar research based on the same questionnaire among students participating in honours programmes in the United States. This would allow us to learn to what extent our findings are comparable. We could then join forces in order to design honours programmes that motivate students in a way that engenders commitment, effort, wisdom, creativity, and high-quality performance. This could result in evidence-based designs of attractive and successful honours programmes with strong spin-off effects on the regular programme 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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