

## **Honours culture: Do honours students create a different study culture?**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the current study is to understand what typifies a culture of honours within programs directed towards excellence in higher education. Based on literature and qualitative research we argue that honours students are directed towards 1) personal development, 2) collaboration, 3) innovation and creativity, and 4) excellence and that honours culture can be characterized in these terms. In the current study we tested whether 1) honours students are more directed towards these four elements than regular students and 2) whether these four elements are related to participation or non-participation in honours programs. To test this a digital questionnaire ( $N = 1246$ ) measuring the four elements of honours culture and reasons for participation or non-participation in honours programs was developed and distributed. Independent t-tests show that honours students indeed differ from regular students on personal development, innovation and excellence. Further, although honours students do not differ from regular students on collaboration within the regular program, honours students participating in collaborative honours program do indeed experience more collaboration and sense of community within their honours programs than within regular classes and groups. With respect to reasons to participate, correlational analysis further underlines the importance of collaboration; collaboration within the honours community is related to wishing to work together with a group of motivated students, liking to work on creative and innovative tasks and interest in the content of the program. Our data replicates results from earlier studies and underlines the importance of collaboration and community in understanding honours culture.

## Extended summary

### Introduction

The aim of the current study is to understand what typifies a culture of honours within programs directed towards excellence at higher education institutions. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2011, p. 21) define culture as the collective mental programming by which members of one group differ from other groups. As honours students differ from regular students (Van Eijl, 2007; Wolfensberger, 2012; Tiesinga, 2014) we expect that they create their own culture reflecting these differences.

Qualitative research among students and teachers shows that honours students are directed towards four elements of a culture within honours communities: 1) **personal development**; 2) **collaboration** within their community; 3) **innovation** and creativity and 4) **excellence** (Tiesinga, 2014).

The idea that honours students are more directed towards personal development, innovation and excellence was supported by quantitative research by Scager, Akkerman, Keesen, Mainhard, Pilot and Wubbels (2012). Yet, this research did not explore the potential role that collaboration might play in understanding honours culture.

### Research Questions

The current study aims at answering three central research questions:

1. Do honours students indeed differ from regular students in respect of the elements of 'honours culture'.
2. Do honours students within their honours community experience more collaboration and sense of community than within their regular program?
3. What are the main reasons for participation in honours programs and do these relate to the four elements of honours culture?

### Method

A questionnaire was constructed, comprising validated and reliable scales ( $\alpha > .81$ ) on characteristics of honours students (derived from Scager et al., 2012), covering the three elements **personal development** (scale 'desire to learn'), **excellence** (scales 'drive to excel' and 'persistence'), **innovation** (scales 'creativity' and 'openness to experience') and a newly developed scale (based on Wilson, Ludwig-Hardmann, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004) concerning **collaboration** and sense of community. Further, questions concerning participation in honours programs were asked.

The questionnaire was digitally distributed among all full-time bachelor students of Hanze UAS (in 2013: 23743 full-time students, including 1076 honours students). The questionnaire was answered by 1246 students (1085 regular students and 161 honours students).

## Results

Regarding the first research question independent t-tests showed as expected that honours students scored higher on personal development, excellence and innovation than regular students (see Table 1). Honours students did not score higher on collaboration within the regular program compared with regular students.

Regarding the second research question, students that actually participate in collaborative honours programs ( $N = 87$ ) do indeed experience more collaboration and sense of community within their honours program ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) than within their regular program ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $t(86) = 4.65$ ,  $p < .001$ .

With respect to the third research question, results show that the main reasons for students to take part in an honours program are personal development, drive for excellence by distinguishing themselves towards the labour market, collaboration within a group of motivated students and working on creative and innovative tasks (See Table 2).

There are several correlations between reasons for actually participating in an honours program and the elements of honours culture. All reasons for taking part significantly correlate with the excellence scale (correlations between  $r(161) = .18$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $r(161) = .39$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The strongest correlation exists between the emphasis on working together with a group of motivated students and the positive experience of collaboration in the honours program,  $r(152) = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ . Analysis further shows that students who take part in an honours program because they like to work on creative and innovative tasks,  $r(150) = .30$ ,  $p < .001$  and who are interested in the content of the honours program,  $r(151) = .47$ ,  $p < .001$  also collaborate more and experience more sense of community in their honours program.

Descriptive analysis shows that the main reasons for not being interested in an honours program are that students don't have the opportunity and that the regular study program offers sufficient challenges. Not being sufficiently aware of the opportunities and concern about possible delays in their studies are also important reasons (Table 3). Interestingly, correlational analysis shows that the reasons for not

participating in honours programs are negatively correlated with several elements of honours culture.

### **Significance of the research**

The current study shows that honours students are indeed more focused on personal development, innovation and excellence than regular students. Further, although honours students do not differ from regular students in collaboration within the regular program, students that actually participate in collaborative honours programs do indeed experience more collaboration and sense of community within these programs than within the regular program.

As such it replicates earlier quantitative work by Scager et al. (2012) and extends it by adding a focus on collaboration and community (See also Tiesinga, 2014). The study further confirms the importance of collaboration within an honours community, especially for students who wish to work together within a group of motivated students, like to work on creative and innovative tasks and are interested in the content of the honours program. With their motivation for personal development and focus on excellence, creativity and innovation, honours students create their own culture in a collaborative environment.

### **References**

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Table 1  
*Differences Between Regular and Honours Students.*

Element	Grouping	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Excellence	Regular	4.88	0.93	-7.63	238	.00
	Honours	5.38	0.75			
Personal development	Regular	5.31	0.90	-7.71	240	.00
	Honours	5.80	0.73			
Innovation	Regular	4.88	0.91	-6.41	231	.00
	Honours	5.31	0.77			
Collaboration	Regular	4.58	1.15	-1.00	1236	.32
	Honours	4.68	1.08			

Table 2  
*Reasons for Participating or Possibly Participating in Honours Programs*<sup>a</sup>.

	Taking part <i>N</i> = 162	Will possibly take part <i>N</i> = 545
I would like to develop my talents and skills to the best of my abilities	6.31	5.94
I want to improve my perspectives on the labour market	6.06	5.76
I would like to work together with a group of motivated students	5.72	5.25
I would like to work on creative and innovative tasks	5.69	5.56
I think the content of the honours program is interesting	5.40	4.59
I miss the challenge in my regular study program	4.96	4.34
I am stimulated to take part in an honours program by my social environment	4.21	3.38

<sup>a</sup> On seven point Likert type scale, ranging from not at all true for me (1) - very true for me (7)

Table 3  
*Reasons for Not Being Interested in Honours Programs*<sup>a, b</sup>.

	<i>M</i>
Due to other activities I don't have the opportunity to participate in an honours program	4.49
To me, the regular study program offers sufficient challenges	4.31
I am insufficiently aware of the opportunities to participate in an honours program	4.17
I am concerned about delays in my studies if I were participating in an honours program	3.95
I don't feel like spending more time on studying	3.63
My study results are insufficient to participate in an honours program	3.40
To me, an honours program is for over achievers	3.39
The contents of the honours programs offered do not appeal to me	3.25
Honours programs rely too much on your own creativity	2.91
I think I will be less popular with my fellow students	1.88

<sup>a</sup> On seven point Likert type scale, ranging from not at all true for me (1) - very true for me (7)

<sup>b</sup> Students not interested or possibly interested in honours programs (*N* min. = 918)