

## **'To develop research skills': Honours programmes for the changing research agenda in Australian universities**

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Within Australian universities the results of Honours have traditionally been used as the main entry requirement for a research degree and as a means of ranking for research scholarships. But despite the critical role of Honours, there has been little research about Honours. There is an untested assumption that universities offering Honours programmes, staff teaching them, and students undertaking them share common assumptions about their purpose. To test this assumption the researchers undertook an initial study across five Australian universities in two different disciplines, to identify the extent to which staff and students in different disciplines and different universities held varying views about the purpose of the Honours. Honours coordinators and students in the sample universities were interviewed and Honours information for the universities examined. Results indicate that indeed the aims of an Honours programme and the reasons for enrolling in Honours do vary. However, more significantly, there have been identifiable changes in the structure and nature of Honours programmes over recent years that may not support some of the traditionally held views of Honours, particularly as a selection mechanism for enrolment in, and scholarship ranking for, higher degrees by research.

**Keywords:** research training; curriculum

### **Background**

In Australian universities there are several models for Honours at undergraduate level. The most common models include an additional, fourth year for which students are selected based on a high Grade Point Average (GPA) in the previous two or three years of study. The other model is a four-year degree where students graduate with Honours if their GPA throughout is at credit level or above, i.e. between 60 and 70%. The former is the more common, and has traditionally been aimed at students who want to undertake a one-year research project with the possibility of leading to a research degree.

However, new models are being developed which meet the identified needs of students and the disciplines. Australian universities are keenly aware of the 1999 Bologna Declaration to develop a comparable system of undergraduate and post-graduate awards across Europe to open up higher education opportunities for students. In addition, the increasingly global nature of research through the use of

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technology, ease of transport, and the need to interact with colleagues worldwide has changed the way in which we educate future researchers.

In Australian universities Honours traditionally played two roles: as the 'rounding off' year of an undergraduate degree, and as the preliminary, training year for a research degree. As part of this second role, a critical factor is the use of the Honours grade, particularly for the research project, to allocate Higher Degree by Research (HDR) places and rank candidates for scholarships. In Australian universities Honours is graded to give what is generally known as a 'class' of Honours (Table 1).

Earlier research indicates that, from students' perspectives, the main reasons for undertaking Honours were 'to improve job opportunities and interest in the subject' (Hawes, 2000). However, the stress of the Honours year is given as one of the main reasons for not pursuing a higher degree by research award, along with the view that 'only students with first-class Honours are accepted into higher degrees and so it was not worth the effort' (G. Mullins, personal communication, 2004).

Percentages of students undertaking Honours have varied considerably across disciplines (Nulty, 1992) and reports arising from the review of Academic Standards conducted by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) confirmed this (AVCC, 1990, 1991, 1992a, 1992b). Moses (1989) suggests that differing roles of Honours across disciplines make university-wide comparisons of Honours results problematic. This view is supported by a UK study which stated: 'Science students [entering a doctoral programme] in possession a first or upper second class degree (70%) were more likely to submit successfully in four years than those with other classes (60%), whereas arts and humanities students in possession of first degrees other than first or second class honours (52%) were insignificantly more likely to submit successfully in four years or equivalent' (Wright & Cochrane, 2000, p. 188).

Successful supervision during Honours is deemed important as it provides encouragement and support, guidance and consultation, and is a basis for satisfactory completion of the Honours programme (Armstrong & Shanker, 1981; AVCC, 1995; Romano & Smyrnios, 1996). In addition, from institutional and supervisory perspectives Honours can provide useful training for future supervisors and examiners of doctoral candidates (Kiley & Mullins, 2004). This is particularly important as a student's Honours supervisor is likely to have the greatest influence on a student's choice of university for postgraduate study (Kiley & Austin, 2000).

Australian Government Department of Education Science and Training (2003) statistics show that more females than males were enrolled in Honours programmes in Australian universities in 2003. However, earlier work by Conrad (1995) suggests that women and mature age students tend to use alternative routes to a research degree. In addition, earlier research undertaken between 1995 and 1999 (Conrad, 1995; Hawes, 2000; Prestage & Lichtenberg, 1996) reported that despite very high motivation and ability, very few women proceeded to a fourth undergraduate year of study. This might be explained by data that indicated that women students were only half as likely as men to have had academic staff members suggest Honours to them.

Table 1. Expression of Honours results.

	First class	Second class (A) or IIA	Second class (B) or IIB	Third class
Overall result	80–100%	70–79.9%	60–69.9%	50–59.9%

However, there has been little research specifically targeting the potential benefits to students or the effects of Honours programmes on students (Byrne, 1998; Huggett, 2003; Long, 2002; McInerney & Robinson, 2001; Romano & Smyrniotis, 1996). There is, we believe, an untested assumption that universities offering Honours programmes, staff teaching them and students undertaking them share common assumptions about their purpose, yet higher education in Australia has changed significantly over the past two decades as have student circumstances. Furthermore, postgraduate coursework programmes, e.g. Graduate Diplomas, which might be an appropriate option for students wanting to enhance job opportunities, are now fee-paying while Honours programmes are Commonwealth-supported, i.e. student fees are covered by an interest-free 'loan'. Hence it is possible that students are enrolling in Honours when they might be better served by a coursework degree.

If entry into Honours programmes, students' motivation for undertaking Honours, and the content of Honours have changed, this may well have a significant impact on the suitability of Honours ratings for use in selection for admission to higher degree programmes and scholarship allocation.

### **Methodology**

The researchers undertook a study across five Australian universities across three states with the aim of identifying:

- the extent to which staff and students in different disciplines and different universities held varying views about the purpose of Honours, and
- the extent to which these views influence the types of Honours programmes offered.

Honours coordinators and students who had recently graduated were interviewed. The sample was developed to give a spread of universities and disciplines. Two disciplines in each of the universities were selected, one in the biological sciences and one in humanities. The same disciplines were used across the five universities (see Table 2).

Using the websites, handbooks and calendars of the five universities the researchers identified the ways in which each Honours programme was described in terms of stated aims, selection of students, programme, and assessment. (To maintain the anonymity of the universities, the specific handbooks and websites have not been referenced.)

Once the descriptions of each course had been completed the Honours coordinator for each discipline, i.e. 10 coordinators, was contacted and an interview arranged. Interviews were semi-structured in nature with some specific questions arising from the written descriptions. At the interview each coordinator was asked to suggest a

Table 2. Sample of universities.

Coded university	Type of university (Marginson, 1999)	Code
Universities 1 and 2	Sandstones (Australia's oldest universities)	SS
Universities 3 and 4	Gumtrees (established in Australia between the 1960s and 1970s)	GT
University 5	New University (established within the last 10–15 years)	NU

recently graduated student who they thought would be prepared to be interviewed. One of the researchers, herself a student, then asked the students similar questions to the coordinators but from a student perspective.

All interviews were transcribed and returned to the interviewees for comment. Strict confidentiality was maintained. Students and coordinators did not see each other's responses.

The coordinator interviews were then analysed. Firstly, they sought themes within the interviews related to the aims and design of their programme, what we perceived to be the motivation of students to undertake Honours, and their views on Honours as a predictor of HDR success. Secondly, responses to the same questions were analysed seeking similarities and differences. The second form of analysis was to check for consistency within each response, particularly with regard to the discipline of the coordinator and the type of university. The analysis was undertaken separately and then results compared and discussed to enable various insights to the data to be expressed. Student interviews were analysed separately, but in a similar manner, and both sets of results are reported together.

## **Results**

Of particular interest when analysing the interviews was the distinct perspectives of coordinators and students. For example, coordinators tended to talk from the perspective of the discipline and how Honours contributed, or otherwise, to the discipline or how Honours had changed and developed as a reflection of other changes in the discipline. Students, on the other hand, spoke from a very personal perspective for example, the effect on their health and well-being, the importance of family, friends and fellow students. These differences are outlined below.

### *Coordinators' responses*

#### *Aims of Honours*

When questioned about the stated aims for Honours, responses varied, for example one that reflected an institutional perspective: 'To actually attract students of the calibre that they can do a research orientated degree' (NU\_Hum5\_Coordinator). On the other hand, the following comment perhaps reflects more of a discipline perspective: 'My view is that what we are getting our students to do, what we are teaching them or what we are helping them through the transition is from learning about science to actually doing it. We are educating scientists' (SS\_Sci2\_Coordinator). A third comment reflects more of a view about research itself: 'Our view is that it's an opportunity first and foremost to introduce students to the broad area of doing research [rather than necessarily preparing for an HDR award] ... I guess probably 80% of our Honours students don't go on to PhD research or MA research' (SS\_Hum2\_Coordinator). A fourth perspective represented in the interviews is the notion of a student's personal development and consolidation: 'I think on the idealistic side we regard Honours as another year of training for students who want to increase their qualifications in the job market. It is viewed as a year of personal development' (GT\_Sci4\_Coordinator).

Within the broad aims, most programmes were designed to assist students in developing research, writing, and communication skills, with several also having an emphasis on time and project management.

### *Student motivation*

Coordinators appeared well aware of student motivations, reporting students undertook Honours to consolidate their undergraduate degree in an effort to have an 'edge' in the job market, and as a prelude to postgraduate study – although the latter was not always strongly supported. For example

[for] most of them ... it was a developmental thing, it was a further training thing and most of them had absolutely no idea about postgraduate research so it doesn't enter their minds. In most cases, most of the students don't understand that at the end of third year there is this pathway into academia. (GT\_Sci4\_Coordinator)

However, where departments spent time informing students about Honours early in their undergraduate award, there appears to be an appreciation of Honours as a stepping-stone to a research career.

Right at the start ... we are saying to them we know this is a three-year degree but at this stage start considering the possibility of a fourth year to improve your educational roundness and Honours could be one of these vocational programmes, like a Masters in xxx. (GT\_Sci3\_Coordinator)

Certainly in terms of having 'an edge' in the job market, the common answer in science was that it was unlikely a student would get a job as a scientist with a three-year science degree only. Similarly in the humanities an interviewee stated that: 'Students ... consider it as the minimum qualification really that you need for getting a job, so an Honours degree has the equivalence of what a Bachelor Degree had a generation ago' (SS\_Hum1\_Coordinator).

### *Design of programmes*

Most coordinators commented that the design of their programme had recently undergone, or was undergoing, changes and that these changes were aimed at two issues:

- ongoing assessment and feedback of student work;
- providing a range of components within the Honours programme.

For example, one science programme stated that Honours consists of three parts: research project dossier and thesis (60%), 'additional' work (30%) and a seminar (10%). However, these components include a sophisticated combination of formative and summative research skill development and research output. The research project includes a thesis of 70 pages, a dossier and a research seminar. Ongoing formative as well as summative feedback is provided to the student. The aim of the dossier is to indicate the evolution of the research project, which in other disciplines might be equated with a journal. The research seminar is assessed by all academics in the department. Included in the 60% weighting for this component of the work, the student's laboratory notes are also examined. The 'additional' work includes a 5000-word literature review worth 5%, an initial research seminar which is formatively assessed, and a research proposal. The research proposal, worth 25%, is aimed at developing an understanding of a broader area of science than just the specific topic. An initial seminar, worth 5% of the overall mark, is discussed for 40 minutes with the panel of assessors as a means of further developing the student's thinking.



As this indicates, many specific activities within the overall requirements aim to provide students with feedback throughout the year as well as a summative result at the end. In addition, the combination of practical work and a research project has been newly designed to meet a changing situation with regard to funding and student numbers.

This one example of the sophisticated combination of components within the overall Honours programme was reflected in most of the universities.

### *Honours as a predictor of HDR success*

Many of the coordinators had been involved in Honours coordination and/or supervision for many years, hence when asked whether they thought that Honours was a good predictor of HDR success they could answer with some experience. Responses generally suggested that Honours was in fact a good predictor of HDR success, although as one interviewee stated: 'I am sure it is not ideal but is there something better?' (GT\_Sci3\_Coordinator). However, there was some suggestion that it was only with outstanding students that the rating/grading was a true predictor. For example,

Certainly any student from this department – the ones who got the really top first-class Honours – pretty much all of them who have been through during the time I have been here in the xxx department are now doing really well. I can't think of anyone who has fallen by the wayside. (SS\_Sci2\_Coordinator)

In addition to 'the very top' students there was a large 'middle' group, for whom an Honours grading was a reasonable, although not necessarily accurate, predictor of success. In these cases, the argument was made that having completed Honours a student certainly had an advantage, but the grading of their Honours was a loose predictor only. In one traditional humanities programme the coordinator had noticed a steady increase in the number of students in the 'mid range'.

There has been a kind of odd fallout in the department actually in that we've usually got quite a large body of people somewhere in the middle ... then a whole bunch of people who were very, very good and lots of people who will be continuing to higher degrees. (SS\_Hum1\_Coordinator)

For this large 'middle' group the advantages noted by coordinators of having undertaken Honours included: time management skills, ability to produce a thesis, and to communicate research findings, for example:

I think it has been [a good predictor], mainly because the project has been such a major part of the Honours year here, you really got graded on your ability to produce a thesis ... so I think our students are very well trained for postgraduate research. (GT\_Sci4\_Coordinator)

### *The student perspective*

#### *Aims of Honours*

Unlike the study by Hawes (2000) cited earlier, all students interviewed agreed that the main aims of undertaking Honours were to gain the necessary prerequisite for

admission to a postgraduate research degree, to develop verbal and written communication, analytical, evaluation and problem-solving skills, and to consolidate their undergraduate programme by 'giving a good solid basic foundation in the basic sciences of the area that you are doing honours in' (GT\_Sci3\_Student).

### *Student motivation*

Most students indicated that they had started thinking about undertaking Honours from the second year of their undergraduate degree, and that their motivations included the challenge to be involved in gaining new knowledge and to gain necessary qualifications for further research in their area of interest. One student indicated he was motivated to undertake Honours to 'test' his capabilities and to learn more about a field he was passionate about (GT\_Sci4\_Student).

These findings are consistent with previous research (Armstrong & Shanker, 1981; Hawes, 2000; Parsloe, 1993), which found that most students are motivated to undertake an Honours degree for a variety of reasons including job opportunities, an interest in the subject, as an alternative to their daily lives, and being considered able enough to undertake such a programme.

### *Design of programmes*

From the student perspective the comments regarding the programmes were slightly different from coordinators. For example, one of the students stated that while there was no specific coursework in his Honours programme 20% of the final grade came from a choice of project proposal, literature review, presentation or essay (NU\_Sci5\_Student). The humanities student from this same university was very critical of the university for not providing 'specific support to those doing Honours' and that this was compounded by administrative problems experienced 'due to its newness' (NU\_Hum5\_Student).

Students did suggest that whilst their programmes were demanding, they would like to see a number of changes made, for example:

- 'More in-depth exposure on career guidance' (NU\_Sci5\_Student).
- 'Changes to the coursework component of the Honours programme so that it related more to the research topic' (SS\_Sci2\_Student).
- Changes to the structure of the programme 'to give it more flexibility and ease the pressure off in terms of the weight of the Honours thesis subject' (NU\_Hum5\_Student).

One student was concerned that his programme included a topic which involved students from various disciplines that resulted in the 'expression of specific and incommensurable discourses and interests' (GT\_Hum4\_Student).

### *Honours as a predictor of HDR success*

Students reported that the Honours programme prepared them very well for further studies, with one student describing it as a 'vital precursor' (SS\_Sci2\_Student). A number of the students also indicated that the Honours programme helped them to 'develop research skills that take the student beyond graduate level' (GT\_Sci4\_Student), and that

it 'offered an alternative to the Masters programme' (GT\_Hum3\_Student). Of the students interviewed, one student had already commenced a PhD, two students were preparing to continue with higher degree studies, and another student had not yet decided on higher degree studies as she still had to complete her double (Honours) degree.

#### *Available resources*

Access to resources and support facilities varied across universities, with library facilities, room or office space seen as a necessity for Honours students. Most students indicated that the resources provided by their universities were quite adequate. One, from a Gumtree university, praised it for 'providing an excellent environment in which to undertake Honours study' (GT\_Hum3\_Student). These resources included consultations with a supervisor, unrestricted use of a postgraduate computer room, financial assistance with photocopying costs, the offer of scholarships, dissertation preparation workshops, opportunities to publish papers, and invitations to attend various seminars and discussion groups within the academic community. At the other Gumtree university students indicated that their research needs were 'entirely library based', and that 'all Honours students are provided with a ... budget for their project' (GT\_Sci4\_Student).

At each of the Sandstone universities, the students indicated that the Library resources provided by the department, such as books and articles on interlibrary loan, were 'really good' (SS\_Sci2\_Student). One of these students did feel that the lack of a 'common room' provided no opportunity for the group to meet to discuss their projects (SS\_Hum1\_Student). This was not the experience at the New University, where both students indicated that 'apart from the resources available to any other student ... library resources were not really adequate' (NU\_Sci5\_Student).

#### *Student's well-being*

When describing the impact that undertaking the Honours year had on their emotional and physical health, their relationships with close friends and family members, and their financial circumstances, all students agreed that it was a 'tough' year both emotionally and financially. Emotional and physical health of the students varied across universities, and was not related to the type of Honours programmes being undertaken. One student reported that his happiness was defined by the feedback he received from his supervisor and how focused he was on his project. Family support was very important for all students. Most students also agreed that time management was crucial to the successful completion of their programme. However, despite these sacrifices and pressures, when expressing their overall view of the Honours year, most of the students agreed that whilst tough it was very worthwhile and extremely stimulating. Other descriptors used by students were 'intense', 'valuable,' and 'sense of community'.

#### **Discussion**

This pilot study indicates that there are some similarities across disciplines and universities. For example, a first-class Honours is generally perceived as a good, although untested, predictor of future HDR success. Another common finding was the



recent or current changes that programmes were undergoing. Most programmes were developing sophisticated learning and assessment strategies as integrated components in an effort to help students develop research and personal skills.

Our findings support the idea that students have a range of aims and motivations for undertaking Honours programmes across Australia. The findings also indicate that Honours programmes have changed in the way they meet the aspirations of students. Furthermore, the research indicated that while students have differing reasons for undertaking Honours, coordinators are well aware of these differences and are working to accommodate them.

However, these findings mask a number of more central issues. For example, if Honours consolidates an undergraduate award and provides the training for an HDR award, what about those disciplines and universities where there are no Honours provisions or they are still developing? Also if Honours is a training ground for staff as well as students, where do supervisors gain their learning and development regarding supervision and assessment at the HDR level if the university or discipline does not have Honours? In disciplines where Honours programmes are being, or have recently been, established is the student experience likely to be hampered by inadequate resourcing?

How do Australian Honours programmes and experiences relate to those in other countries? This issue is an important one from three perspectives. Firstly, from the perspective of students coming from outside Australia to undertake research degrees and, secondly, from the perspective of Australian students travelling overseas to undertake a research award. Thirdly, there is the issue of the globalisation of research experience. Are Honours students in Australia interacting with students undertaking similar programmes elsewhere, no matter what they are called? This not only requires access to suitable technology, but a view of the world and oneself that facilitates learning and collaboration across geographical, cultural and language boundaries, that is, access to the international discourse in their discipline.

If, as the previous research in this area indicates, certain groups of students, particularly women, are not identified and encouraged to go on to Honours, what does this mean with regard to using Honours in HDR selection? In disciplines and universities where Honours is relatively new, or perhaps given lower priority, staff might not be sensitised to, and aware of, the different aims of Honours and the importance of their own role in identifying and encouraging potential Honours students early in their degrees.

The Honours year has certainly changed in the universities in this pilot study. This is not change for change's sake. It is often a result of larger undergraduate classes and less funding, as well as believing that graduates need 'an edge' in the employment market. From a student perspective, the financial pressures have also increased. Hence, in some cases students are entering with a different set of experiences, skills, knowledge and support than might have been expected 10–15 years earlier.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this pilot study suggest that:

- In the eyes of students and coordinators Honours programmes have two quite specific roles: as a 'rounding off' of an undergraduate award, and as training for further research.

- On the whole, Honours programmes are creatively constructed and assessed to give students a broad range of experiences and skills.
- A first-class (IA) Honours result is still considered by staff as a sound predictor of HDR success.
- Honours programmes have changed and what might have been thought of as Honours 10–15 years ago is often now somewhat different.

As anticipated with a initial study such as this, there is much more work to be done to fully understand the role and significance of Honours in Australia from the perspectives of students, employers, supervisors, coordinators and institutions. Any research in this area needs to be mindful of disciplinary and university differences and of the twin roles of Honours in Australian universities. Ultimately, however, Honours is about developing people. As one Honours graduate in our study said:

Honours has given me an idea of what is involved in doing Masters or Doctoral studies. From another perspective, Honours has added value to my degree and to my 'worth' as a professional.

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### Notes on contributors

Margaret Kiley works in the Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods at the Australian National University and is currently leading a nationally funded project to map Honours across Australian universities.

Thea Moyes was engaged in research related to Honours as part of her Masters programme at the University of Canberra.

Peter Clayton, as a member of the University of Canberra's Division of Communication and Education, has specialised in the area of Library and Information Management.

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