

# Honours: Where Does The Future Lie?

Preliminary findings of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Project: *The Role of Honours in Contemporary Australian Higher Education*

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## Overview

- Introduction
- Presentation of the background and results of the study
- Break
- Discussion of issues and concerns
- Summary

## Background

- Aim of project
  - Mapping variation
  - Scoping current status of Honours
  - Identifying issues
- Background to the Australian Honours
  - Scottish origin
  - Pivotal position between undergraduate and various graduate destinations - so can't 'tinker' with Honours without considering implications

## Honours statistics

- National statistics appear to be unreliable
- Therefore, to answer the question that is frequently raised:  
*'Are Honours enrolments dropping?'*  
we need to look at specific disciplines and universities

## Data Collection (1)

- Seven universities with different aims, disciplinary groupings, and 'Honours'
- Six disciplines
  - Physics
  - History
  - Economics
  - Psychology
  - Engineering
  - Environmental Studies

## Data Collection (2)

- Issues paper
  - Responses from approx 50% of Australian universities
- Interviews with convenors
  - Of six disciplines in seven universities
- Survey of students
  - In the same disciplines and universities as the convenors

## Issues raised by previous reviews

- Honours an adequate benchmark for PhD scholarship allocation
- The institutional positioning of Honours: visible in the disciplines yet unseen in some institutional situations
- Honours graduate attributes and destinations
- The place of Honours in a global environment including higher degrees outside Australia
- Teaching and learning dimensions of Honours

## Additional issues raised

- In addition to those raised in earlier studies, our study found the following:
  - Resourcing (some Honours programs suffering through lack of staff, others cutting back on other programs to support Honours)
  - Perceived decline in enrolments (but discipline and university specific)
- Our study also uncovered a much more complex picture than these issues would suggest

## What is Honours?

- A qualification?
- A year?
- A program?
- A process?
- A higher level of learning?
- Or ...?

## Honours qualification

- Accorded across whole degree
- Awarded on 'additional / different' work undertaken within four year program
- Awarded on work in the fourth, additional year
- High achieving school leavers enrolled in special four year advanced program resulting in Honours

## Models

- End on
  - Following the completion of an ordinary degree at a high level of achievement (usually average or higher)
  - As above, but with pre-requisites in second or third year
- Embedded
  - With selection of additional 'Honours' components
  - Awarded based on high levels of achievement (usually Credit average of above) across the whole program or more specifically in the fourth year
- Composite and double degrees
- Bachelor of Philosophy

## Process

- Learning at a more complex / sophisticated and independent level than undergraduate
- Focus on research - led approach to learning
- Learning through a 1 : 1 or 1 : few situation
- A 'taster' for possible further research (or not)
- *However*, Honours is still classified (and maybe implicitly considered to be) an *undergraduate degree*

## Honours as the benchmark of PhD scholarships

- Given the variation reported it might not be surprising that there is some institutional concern regarding benchmarking and comparability: However,
  - Honours, in all its different manifestations is still considered useful by those in the disciplines
  - Research suggests that standardisation across the institution is not necessary but agreement with a set of basic principles is

## What's the purpose of Honours?

- Research preparation?
- Professional preparation?
- Development of the discipline?
- Or ...?

## Purposes

- Research pathway
- Preparation for a research degree, hence:
  - Additional knowledge and skill, and
  - An entry qualification

## Professional pathway

- Additional knowledge and skills required by some professionals
  - Need knowledge of, and involvement by, profession
- In others, Honours qualification gives an 'edge' by dint of 'higher levels of achievement'
  - Assessment strategies become critical

## Academic enrichment

- For students who feel they did not have a chance to engage sufficiently with higher level understanding of the discipline
- Not necessarily a 'pathway' but an enriching experience
  - Content takes on additional significance

## Or...

- The affective dimension e.g.
  - Sense of identity
  - Sense of achievement
  - Personal challenge

## What is the practice of Honours?

- A way of teaching?
- A way of learning?

## Teaching issues

- Interesting lack of specific focus on teaching aspects of Honours arising from data
  - Is this because teaching / supervising at the Honours level is implicitly understood or misunderstood ... or?
- Powerful role of Honours supervisor in advising on future directions
- Substantial variation on forms of assessment of thesis and other components

## Findings

- High levels of variation
  - 'Honours' has multiple meanings (process, award, level of achievement, level of intellectual engagement)
  - Encompasses broad range of needs
  - Highly valued by the discipline but often misunderstood outside the academy
- However,
  - Honours provides opportunities for creative curriculum and pedagogical practices as well as new programs
  - Convenors generally very proud of the program and its graduates
- And strong agreement on the characteristics of Honours

## Curriculum features

- Agreed features from the research:
  - Advanced discipline knowledge
  - Research training
  - Substantial, independent research project
- Balance of these three features part of the variation and depends on purpose, discipline

## Questions

- Are there alternative forms in which advanced discipline knowledge, research training and scholarly research can be provided to:
  - Students
  - The discipline
  - The institution
  - Profession / Industry
- How might such a program be promoted to potential students?
- What are the funding implications of any proposed change?
- How might institutions support diverse programs yet maintain quality?
- How might the Australian model work within the global higher education environment?

## Discussion (30 minutes)

- In groups of 4 – 6
- Note ideas and suggestions
- Report at the end

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## Further information

- Honours website:

<http://www.aushons.anu.edu.au/>

## Research Team

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- Research assistants and Designers
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