

## **Honouring the incomparable: honours in Australian universities**

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### **Abstract**

The Honours undergraduate degree in Australia is unlike that in most other countries. It has taken on a particular significance as a qualification, as a pathway to and a pre-requisite for direct entry into doctoral programs. This paper explores the outcomes of a study that suggests that the aims, outcomes, curriculum, pedagogical practices, purposes and enrolment patterns of Honours vary substantially across disciplines and university types. It addresses the questions about the diverse nature of Honours programs and questions what this diversity means for Australian higher education in the context where global standardisation of awards is rapidly occurring. Honours is seen variously as a qualification, an experience, or a program. These variations are discussed and it is demonstrated that Honours globally has not one, but many meanings. These meanings are often poorly understood within, and outside the academy. These multiple meanings create confusion about what Honours stands for and inhibit communication about the role and purpose of Honours both within Australia and in a global context.

Keywords: research education, curriculum planning, learning outcomes, research skill, student experience

### **Introduction**

While many countries have degrees that include the name 'Honours', the Australian Honours degree, though taken by less than 10% of the undergraduate student population, has held particular significance as a pathway to research study. The principal government scholarship for doctoral study—the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA)—requires a first class Honours degree or equivalent, and although many equivalents are possible, they are all typically more demanding and time-consuming to complete. Unlike many other countries, in Australia there is not a strong and well-defined pathway to doctoral

study through a Masters degree that prepares candidates for research, and the great majority of Australian Masters programs tend to have an advanced professional rather than a research orientation. Hence, Honours in Australia has been regarded traditionally as the main academic pathway to doctoral education and yet, there appears to be no international equivalent that has such pivotal significance.

This paper draws on a study of Australian Honours programs that examined the structural and substantive variability that exists in them not primarily between institutions but between disciplines. It considers the implications of this variability in a national system that increasingly values standardisation and an international higher education system that needs to cater for increasing mobility of students and cross-recognition of qualifications.

In the Australian context, Honours takes three particular forms. Firstly, as an end-on year (3 + 1 model) where 'Honours' is a separate and additional year of study following a Bachelors Degree (for example BA (Hons), BSc (Hons)). This is the form of Honours that is often considered to have uniquely Australian characteristics. Secondly, as an embedded program, where specific 'Honours' requirements are embedded into and awarded within the same time frame as the Pass degree (examples can be found in Engineering and Law). Thirdly, and perhaps more in tune with the international concept of the award, is 'Honours' as an accorded qualification, that is, where the 'Honours' in a degree title denotes the quality of achievement in a common program with Pass graduates. This is also common practice in many professionally oriented courses in Australia (Kiley et al. 2009a, b, pp. 16–17).

An examination of Honours programs is timely for several reasons. As the impacts of the Bologna Agreement process (European Ministers of Education 1999) are being considered by Australian universities, Honours has become a focus of attention given its particular role within Australian higher education. The Bologna initiative promotes an alignment of European higher education with a model of a three-year (first cycle) undergraduate degree, two-year (second cycle) Masters and then a three-year (third cycle) doctoral degree (3 + 2 + 3). This compares with the conventional Australian system of a 3-year undergraduate degree, 1-year Honours degree, and a three or 4-year doctoral degree (3 + 1 + 3/4). Clearly the most significant difference is the middle rung, which raises questions about the equivalence, compatibility, and translatability of Honours and Masters as pathways to doctoral programs. For the Australian education system, questions of alignment with the Bologna process draw attention to the ever pervasive impact of globalisation, for not only is it an issue concerning the meaning, status and relevance of Australian qualifications abroad, but it has implications for the mobility of Australian students and the attractiveness of Australia for international students.

At a national level, concerns about perceptions of dwindling Australian domestic student applications for doctorates warrants an examination of Honours, given its pivotal role between an undergraduate and research degree. Enrolment patterns vary hugely in different disciplines, with some areas experiencing growth (for example, Health Sciences) and others a decline (for example, in several Humanities disciplines). In the previous climate of economic prosperity and low unemployment, some graduates were opting for the more lucrative salaries of industry rather than pursuing higher degrees by

research and then academic careers. However, with the more recent economic downturn it is possible that enrolments in Honours and graduate research degrees may increase in some fields. It is posited that a possible reason for the decline in PhD enrolments has been the changes that have occurred at the Honours level, once the traditional route to PhD entry. This could be because enrolments are particularly sensitive to a domestic economic and political climate as the great majority of Honours students in most disciplines are domestic students.

Nevertheless, the exercise of reviewing Honours is not a consequence of its relationship to postgraduate education alone, but the need to address current changes in Australian undergraduate education. Hence, a third reason for the timeliness of this study relates to changes such as the broadening of offerings in first and second year undergraduate awards and the increasing focus on research-led teaching at these levels, necessitating attention at subsequent levels. The pivotal and to some extent ambiguous role of Honours as the capstone year of an undergraduate award or as the first year of a professional or research qualification means that any changes made to undergraduate and postgraduate awards have an immediate flow-on effect to Honours and vice versa.

Despite the varying definitions and understandings of Honours outlined above, we propose that a clarification of what is understood by 'Honours' is timely, given the centrality of Honours to broader debates in the sector. Our inquiry into the roles and practices of Honours in contemporary Australian higher education found that there are contending perspectives worth unravelling. The administrative issues and whether the term 'Honours' continues to be used to describe this array of learning experiences are not the focus of this paper, but rather we argue for an understanding of its variation and complexity in order that further curriculum and policy developments are based on sound evidence and research.

## **Background**

Initially exported from the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century, Australian Honours replicated the Scottish model. As the Australian curriculum developed to reflect the culture of the emerging nation and to serve its educational and employment demands, so did Honours. It developed under a governmental attitude which viewed the University as a 'community of scholars' in which "intellectual standards were upheld by free inquiry and the pursuit of truth by knowledge intoxicated men (sic) who love the life of intellectual effort and inquiry for its own sake" and whose role it was to put students in touch "with the fountains of knowledge" (Murray Committee 1957). In meeting these aspirations, the role of Honours was to provide a pathway to postgraduate training and research and to offer intellectual stimulation to staff through students. Honours was considered to be a foundation for building strong research schools and at one stage an Honours qualification was sufficient for a tenured academic position.<sup>1</sup>

Honours has since evolved into a particularly Australian practice. Other than sharing the same classifications (i.e. H1, H2A, H2B, H3) there are significant differences in meaning and structure between contemporary Australian and British Honours degrees that renders the British heritage effectively unnoticeable now. In England, a three-year Honours

Bachelor degree has become a standard 'basic first degree', with the Honours classification referring at one time to completion of the degree at a higher level of academic achievement than the 'Ordinary' or 'Pass', but now these latter categories have all but disappeared. By contrast, in Australia, absence of Honours does not mean an insufficient or inferior level of academic performance, but is, with the exception of some embedded models of Honours, quite distinct in structure and pedagogy from a Pass degree and requires high-level academic performance for admission and graduation. It appears that New Zealand and South Africa may be the only other systems that have an Honours qualification similar to Australia. In New Zealand, the implementation of Honours varies according to university and in some cases incorporates the British (with distinction) model and in others the Australian (additional year of research training and preparation) model. South Africa has a variation wherein Honours is generally an additional year of advanced study but is offered as a postgraduate rather than undergraduate qualification, which can be awarded separately or as the first year component of a 2 year Masters degree.

The findings outlined below suggest a paradoxical position for Honours. In some universities Honours is often overlooked in terms of separate funding, student support, and quality assurance. Yet, in terms of reviews at a discipline, institutional and national level, Honours has received considerable attention.

Examples of discipline reviews can be found within and across institutions. Freegard (2008) undertook a review of Honours within the Humanities at the University of Western Australia. The original motivation for the study was to understand why enrolments in the Humanities Honours programs had dropped substantially over recent years. Millar and Peel (2007, p. 45.1) undertook a review in 2005-06 of Honours and postgraduate History coursework programs in 57 Departments and Schools across 44 institutions in Australia, Fiji, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. They found that "On the evidence of this survey, there is a far greater sense of enthusiasm and accomplishment in relation to the Honours year than for postgraduate coursework degrees."

At the university level, examples of reviews include two recent reviews by the University of Queensland in 2003 and 2008, and one by Mullins (2004) at the University of Adelaide. The University of Queensland review aimed to determine ways in which Honours could be standardised across the university, particularly in light of the role of Honours results in scholarship allocation. The first of these reviews was not as successful as those who commissioned it hoped, so 5 years later a second review was undertaken. The study by Mullins (2004, p. 2) was undertaken to uncover why students appeared not to be enrolling in Honours. The findings from this study suggested that students' "primary reason for doing Honours was to improve their chances of getting a job". For those not enrolling, the findings suggested that "In many cases, only a first-class Honours result is regarded as a "successful" outcome because of the perception that a First is needed for a scholarship. As a result the Honours program "soured" for many good students. Moreover, many of these students then believe (incorrectly?) that they are not cut out for postgraduate research" (Mullins 2004, p. 5).<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the best-known reviews are those undertaken by the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (AV-CC) during the 1990s. These studies examined a number of disciplines including Physics, History, Psychology and Economics (AV-CC 1990, 1991, 1992a, b). In these studies, Honours was generally conceived of as advanced training in research skills and a particular discipline. It was recognised as having two prongs: to provide professional training in the field and to provide preparation for pursuing a research degree. The programs aimed to balance both of these aspects of Honours. Only in the case of Economics was striking the balance between both aspects reported to be problematic. In other disciplines, there were differences of opinion over what content should be included for advanced training in that discipline. The reports also showed that Honours served specific functions within the discipline. Despite these reviews, of which the above are only a sample, the Australian higher education sector still has little in the way of a clear and shared understanding of the different models, purposes and outcomes of Honours; hence this study.

### **Project conceptualisation and methodology**

The various concerns outlined above offered a basis for designing a conceptual framework for the study. These concerns would not only map the variations in Honours practices, but would contribute to debates occurring in the sector. Thus we located the Honours mapping task within a climate of tensions and concerns around the understanding of Honours and built them into the project's investigation. We found that what was lacking so far, but integral to thinking through this policy dilemma, was an appreciation of the plurality in meaning of 'Honours'.

Honours degrees, particularly the end-on additional year programs, are designed as a major transitional moment in students' journey from knowledge acquisition to knowledge creation. Given the changes in the production of knowledge as a result of the globalisation and marketisation of education and the ways in which mode 2 knowledge is created in many non-university settings, university graduates can no longer claim a unique ability to acquire and evaluate existing knowledge (Adler et al. 2000; Enders 2004; Jacob & Hellström 2000; Nerad and Heggelund 2008). Employers now require graduates who are able to produce new knowledge' (Manathunga et al. in press).

### **Research site selection**

We selected six disciplines that offered different types of programs in their fourth year. The classifications suggested by Becher and Trowler (2001) regarding hard/soft/pure/applied characteristics of disciplines were present in most of our research sites. Additionally, some of the disciplines were covered in the AV-CC studies and, although not part of our research design, this selection creates an opportunity for further comparison. Physics and History were selected as two of the disciplines known to offer a more traditional Honours program. Economics was selected as one of the disciplines which straddled both a professional and research focus; Honours in Economics is known to provide significant employment advantages. Psychology was selected as a professional area because registration requires successful completion of a fourth year of study, which includes a focus on research skill development and achievement. Engineering was the other

professional area selected, but in this case, Honours is usually achieved within the ordinary degree time frame and is usually the ‘with Honours’ type of program; thus selection into, and assessment for Honours is substantially different from the other disciplines in our sample. Finally, Environmental Studies was selected as a multi-disciplinary area in order to understand developments in some of the newer areas of study.

The six disciplines were located within seven Australian universities representing each of the four university groupings, i.e. the three self-determined formal groupings: the Group of Eight (Go8), the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN), and the Innovative Research Universities (IRU), and a group of universities which we have termed Regional Universities. We chose two universities from each of the first three groupings and one university from the Regional grouping. Given the nature of the universities, not all had the same range of discipline offerings. This was an interesting finding in itself, suggesting that there may be a growing trend to orient to particular markets, for instance professional training or research training. We found that this orientation was often mirrored in the types of Honours programs offered.

### **Research implementation**

Three main sources of data were used for the study: responses to an issues paper, interviews, and a student survey.

Through a broad review and analysis of the historical and policy background of Honours and recent sector reports, and questions put forward in the original project proposal, the project team developed an Issues Paper to obtain the responses of key stakeholders across the country (see [http://www.aushons.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Issues\\_Paper\\_Final.pdf](http://www.aushons.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Issues_Paper_Final.pdf)). The paper set out a range of issues identified from our preliminary work. It was designed to prompt current perceptions from academic managers, Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, coordinators of Honours programs, and students in an attempt to map the current and likely future terrain. Following a summary of each of the identified issues we posed a series of questions that sought participant response. The paper was sent to 160 key stakeholders with 47 responses from 17 universities (46% of Australia’s publicly funded universities).

Forty-five semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with designated coordinators of respective Honours programs, in each of the disciplines and research sites. Each interview took 30–60 min and was transcribed and returned to the interviewee for comment and modification prior to analysis.

The responses to the issues paper and the 45 interviews were analysed for common themes and practices both intra-disciplinary and cross disciplinary, and to identify ways in which, for instance, the range of Honours models the project had identified played out in practice. As a team we analysed a sample of each and then analysed the remainder independently, coming together with results that were then discussed and confirmed.

Our third source of data came from a voluntary, on-line and anonymous survey of current Honours students in the disciplines where interviews had been conducted (see

<http://www.aushons.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Survey.pdf>). The aim of the survey was to sample students' motivations for doing Honours, how they were recruited to Honours, what aspects of Honours teaching and learning they valued, the needs of Honours students, the extent to which they felt they were being supported, and their aspirations following completion of Honours. Eighty-seven students responded to the survey. Given the size of the potential survey population as a result of our site and discipline-restricted approach, and the current workload Honours students were undertaking when surveyed (September 2008), the response rate of approximately 15% was pleasing; we estimate a potential population of 500. However we recognise the limitations of the numbers and sampling for a comprehensive analysis and our findings here are not dependent on their representativeness. The initial results, however, suggest that a larger scale study of Honours students would make a useful contribution to further understanding.

## **Findings**

The study, when bringing together the analysis of the Issues Paper, the interviews, and the survey, resulted in seven main findings. These findings can be loosely categorised as: (a) clarification of Honours and its purpose, (b) curriculum, assessment and pedagogical issues, (c) student views and motivations, and (d) enrolment and organisational issues. Each of these is discussed below and contributes to answering the question: "What is Honours and what does its diversity mean for Australian higher education?"

### **What is Honours?**

Kiley et al. (2009, p. 15) found that "there have been identifiable changes in the structure and nature of Honours programs over recent years that may not support some of the traditionally held views of Honours". This leads to the question: what are the dominant presumptions about 'Honours'? A frequent comment heard during the study can be summarised as "everyone knows what Honours is, the problem is their understanding is different from everyone else's". These varying understandings are outlined below.

As outlined earlier, there is a variety of different styles of degree program called 'Honours'. The end-on Honours, as its name describes, is an end-on or additional year of study after a 3 year Bachelors degree. These are also commonly referred to as 'Honours degrees', implying a separate and stand-alone program of study and award after the completion of a Bachelor degree and are often considered the traditional 'Honours degree'. The accorded Honours is where the 'Honours' component is integrated into a degree program of 4 years duration and where 'Honours' takes on the meaning of achievement of the degree with 'merit' or at a greater than 'Pass' standard. These are also commonly referred to as 'Degrees with Honours' and are obtained by students who demonstrate a high level of performance throughout the overall program. The embedded Honours model is common in the professions and generally requires additional work from the student, but within the standard time frame for the program. Our study also found a fourth form of Honours degree in the Australian context and that is undergraduate research-oriented degrees for outstanding students (recognised on entry into the undergraduate program usually from final year high-school performance), where students undertake research- focussed and closely supervised Honours level programs

throughout their undergraduate degree.

Nevertheless, Honours is still classified (and maybe implicitly considered to be) an undergraduate degree. Unlike postgraduate degrees that often attract students many years after graduating from their undergraduate degree, Honours degrees, even when structurally separated from an undergraduate course, are more closely attached in time and in subject area to undergraduate provision. Furthermore, Honours degrees, by dint of their undergraduate status, come under a quite different funding mechanism (for universities and students) and often quite different organisational and student support structures within the university. The funding issue is critical given that any changes to Honours require a change in the Government funding mechanism. Tuition fees for domestic candidates undertaking postgraduate research degrees (research masters, and doctorates) are fully funded by the Australian taxpayer, via the Government's, Research Training Scheme (RTS). However, students undertaking postgraduate coursework degrees (Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma, and taught Masters) require the student cover the cost of tuition and with undergraduate degrees, including Honours, students repay some of their tuition costs following graduation and employment.

### **The purposes of Honours**

Another finding from the study was the variation in the espoused and implicit purposes of Honours. Taking into account the perspectives of students, academic staff (supervisors and coordinators), the professions and institutions, Honours is variously taken to mean preparation for further higher level research, preparation for a profession, enhanced discipline understanding, or personal development and growth.

Our findings suggest that Honours offers two main pathways: a pathway to a research degree and a pathway to professional employment. Honours also offers academic enrichment, as well as personal and intellectual enhancement that we term the affective dimension of Honours. Each of these four purposes is discussed below.

Where Honours was mainly seen as preparation for a research degree, unsurprisingly the curriculum and assessment tended to have a focus on research training and experience as well as assessment as an entry qualification to a research degree. On the other hand, when seen as a requirement for professional development, one would expect a focus on professional knowledge and skills, and the involvement of the profession in curriculum development and review. For some, the purpose of Honours is employment-related, but more as a means of providing an 'edge' over those applicants who have a normal Bachelors degree:

[Without Honours] You can't actually get a job at the RBA [Reserve Bank of Australia], ACCC [Australian Competition and Consumer Commission]. They might have lesser jobs that they put people into, but basically [in] their main graduate programs they want people who do Honours. So some employment opportunities are closed ... if they don't do that, if they want to really go on and use their economics degree in research or into the environment or a higher-level policy environment. I think at the minimum if you do the Honours year it allows you to get in at higher

levels in most of the jobs that you might have access to in economics anyway.  
(Economics coordinator)

A third purpose identified in the study was academic enrichment. Students and staff reported situations where students feel they did not have a chance to engage sufficiently with higher level understanding of the discipline in the 3 year Bachelors award and hence chose to enrol in a fourth year, which they anticipate will give them an in-depth understanding of a topic or area of study. Where this was the case, as one would expect, disciplinary content would take on a strong focus within the curriculum.

A fourth purpose identified in the data we have termed affective. For example, Honours could provide students with a sense of identity and achievement, particularly where students reported their pleasure at having engaged in a personal and intellectual challenge. It is generally this purpose that one hears about when talking with graduates of the traditional 'end-on' Honours program. Comments from the interviews and the student survey could be broadly rephrased as 'it was my best year at university, intellectually tough and demanding, but with a great sense of achievement'.

These variations in purposes of Honours suggest that the potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication across universities and the higher education sector is substantial.

## **Curriculum**

As with the work of Millar and Peel (2007, p. 45.12), we found that one of the challenges related to Honours involves 'curriculum planning, at fourth year but also in the second and third years of the undergraduate major'. For example, even where Honours might be a fourth, additional study year, in some programs only those students who had undertaken specific courses in second or third year could enrol in Honours, whereas for others there was less of a connection between the fourth and previous years. This compares sharply with those programs where there is no specifically different curriculum, but rather the same fourth year content for all students with Honours defined by level of achievement. Where there was a specific curriculum at the Honours level, interviewees reported variation in the emphasis placed within the curriculum on: enhanced discipline knowledge, research training and satisfactory completion of a substantial research project. In some cases more than one-third of the curriculum was devoted to enhanced discipline knowledge. It is in this area that the variation in staff numbers in a given discipline is significant. For example, where there is a large School, it is possible to offer specific programs for Honours students and even to allow several options for students to choose from. In smaller Schools, coordinators reported that they needed to either limit options according to staff numbers and expertise, and/or allow students to take courses at the Masters level as part of their Honours year.

## **Assessment**

We found that assessment was addressed in two different ways. One response was to describe the assessment strategies adopted in the various programs, for example, the percentage of the total mark given to the dissertation, the role of oral presentation, and

other assessable items in the program. The other approach to discussing assessment related to the role of the Honours' result in relation to employment or further study.

The assessable components for any program and the weightings given to each were consistently different across disciplines, but there was general consistency within particular disciplines. Of interest was that many interviewees sought information from the study, and in particular the interviewer, regarding the comparability of their assessment with other disciplines. The extent and weighting of the project in relation to other aspects of the overall curriculum varied considerably. One university faculty reported variation across Honours degrees ranging from a final weighting of 30% through to 100% for the thesis. Our study suggests that such variation across a faculty or university is not uncommon.

A commonly cited aspect of the assessment process for many of the programs was oral presentation. This might be in the form of a proposal presentation early in the year, followed by a student conference or 'research day', through to an oral assessment in the form of a viva voce as part of the final assessment. No matter which form, most coordinators reported the oral presentation as one of the highlights of their program.

There was considerable variation in the extent to which external examiners were used to assess the final dissertation. In all cases at least two examiners were required. This varied from the supervisor being one examiner with another from the same school, through to no involvement from the supervisor with one examiner external to the university. In one case, while the supervisor did not formally assess the project, she/he was asked to write a report on the student's ability to work within an experimental environment. This report contributed to one-third of the student's overall mark. Acknowledging that the practice may seem biased in some respects, it was claimed to be rigorously monitored by the Honours coordinator and faculty:

We can't judge from a report how the student was in the laboratory...you can't assess how that work was performed from the write-up so...perhaps controversially we also allow the supervisors to assess the report as a report reader so we are judging the report like a research paper, as a scientific document, is this a good piece of science, is it well written, is it well constructed. (Physics coordinator)

### **Teaching issues**

Virtually every coordinator with whom we spoke was proud of their program, their graduates, and their reputation. Furthermore, despite often entailing substantial additional workload, most coordinators argued that Honours was one of the highlights of their academic work. For example, an Economics interviewee suggested his/her Honours program was "a flagship program basically", while a History coordinator commented that "Honours is the real lifeblood of the discipline—because it's very fresh, original research." Another Economics interviewee went so far as to ask "Can you really call yourself a university Department if you don't have Honours?" Not only was there overwhelming enthusiasm for Honours, but there was also a tendency in all disciplines surveyed to regard it as a foundational period of study and one that led one interviewee to

state:

The highlight for me is the people I'm working with, the research students, so the two things I love the best are, we have roughly every month a three hour seminar about whatever stage of the thesis they're up to and so the students come in and we might work on their lit review or we might work on presenting the data in a prac report or in a research report we might look at how to make graphs and things like that and I find that really fun and the other part that is really fun is we have Honours conference in September. (Psychology coordinator)

Work by Anderson (2004) and Armstrong and Shanker (1983) suggests that on the whole Honours adopts a one to one student: supervisor approach. For example: Students reported that their supervisors were supportive and sympathetic to their needs. The majority of supervisors adopted the role of resource person, directing students to references and contacts, discussing ideas and work undertaken. Most students had considerable freedom in the conduct of their work. They were given responsibility for many decisions concerning their research: most, for instance, chose their own research topic and supervisor and most determined the pace at which they worked. They appeared to cope well with the autonomous role of researcher and only a few commented on any difficulties. The non-directive role adopted by supervisors enabled students to develop skills of working on their own (Armstrong and Shanker 1983, p. 177).

Other than a few studies, there is little literature related to the pedagogy of Honours. A number of reasons could be posited for this apparent lack of attention. The first, supported from many of the interviews, is that coordinators and supervisors assume that their role is understood and that there is no requirement for elaboration. Many coordinators reported that it was the role of the supervisor to teach research skills as part of the student's undertaking of the Honours project. Here Honours resembled a traditional master- apprentice model of teaching, which one Physics coordinator characterised in the following way:

Most staff think that Honours students are ... going to be interested in your research and you can mentor them and they'll do a lot of the hard labour for you and it will be a wonderful relationship so they tend to think of it in terms of research independently of some social aspects of getting jobs. (Physics coordinator)

The other overall finding was the lack of specific support and training for Honours coordinators and supervisors. Most interviewees had been in the position of coordinator for more than 12 months. Most coordinators, when asked if they had received any particular support or training for their role, reported that no such support existed. In fact, during a workshop with over twenty coordinators, when asked how coordinators are appointed, the responses ranged from: "I drew the short straw", through to "Last person appointed to the Department" and "The person who wasn't at the meeting when it was decided". When asked if the university had any specific requirements for staff to be Honours supervisors, most reported that they did not know or that there was no such requirement. In every institution however, there was a requirement for some form of registration of supervisors and supervisor training to supervise at the doctoral level. This

seems paradoxical, given that Honours was seen, in some cases, as training to supervise doctoral candidates.

Whether supervising Honours students counted toward workload was a contentious issue in several universities. It was not uncommon for the programs in the study to have no workload allowance for supervising Honours students. In many cases, coordinators reported that staff supervised Honours students because it provided substantial intrinsic academic reward, and for some 'the cherry on the cake'. As might be expected, the workload and benefit associated with supervising Honours students varied by discipline. Often in Humanities and Social sciences a 'one on one' supervisory model was reported whereas in the Sciences it was not uncommon for an Honours student's research to be viewed as a component of the School's research output. The 'plug and socket' model, as an Environmental Science interviewee characterised it, suggested that the Honours program and its students plug into the School's research and conveniently incorporate teaching students research skills with providing the academics/supervisors with research assistance.

In terms of workload, the comment made by approximately half of the interviewees was that supervising Honours students was more difficult than supervising doctoral candidates. Reasons given for this included the short time-frame, effectively 9 months; the intensive nature of the research training required; and the idea that as a supervisor you might put in considerable time and effort to supervising the student and their project, but not manage a publication from the work or a student continuing to a doctorate.

The implicit nature of Honours supervision requires careful consideration in Australian higher education. Honours supervisors play a powerful role in advising on future directions. For example, Kiley and Austin (2008) found that the overwhelming source of information regarding future doctoral students and where to undertake that work had been discussed with their Honours supervisor only.

### **Perceived student motivation for undertaking Honours**

In the early days of Australia's higher education system, undertaking an Honours year was often sufficient for academic employment. It was not until after World War II, when the doctorate was introduced into Australia, that Honours became the standard pathway to a PhD. However, as outlined earlier, our contemporary study suggests that academic staff perceive that students have three main motivations for undertaking Honours: preparation for a doctoral program; additional year of tertiary education as an employment advantage; and substantial interest in the field and/or topic and a desire to learn more. We found, that in the case of one Humanities discipline (History), Honours coordinators perceived that one of the most significant reasons why students pursued Honours was out of interest. As one interviewee put it:

Without being unkind to my own discipline I suppose students who have ... studied History [are] already kind of unemployable. And so there are issues such as marketability and comparability which aren't foremost in their mind, they tend to

study for intrinsic reasons. (History coordinator)

Some of these students might have gone onto a PhD, but often their initial motivation for enrolling in Honours was interest. In programs such as Physics, coordinators considered that students mainly undertook Honours because they wanted to undertake a doctorate:

Honours is where you differentiate the students that only follow recipes and never ever do anything on their own and those students who are able to stand on their own feet and able to think for themselves and that is what you want for a PhD exactly this independence and without Honours I can't even think how you would judge in some other way. (Physics coordinator)

Engineering was quite different with most coordinators believing that the reason fourth year students worked hard to graduate 'with Honours' was that this was seen by students and employers as indicating that the student was bright and hence more desirable as an employee. The situation with Psychology is different again, where much of the motivation to undertake the fourth year Honours was to qualify for registration. Most Psychology Honours coordinators suggested that they expected that very few of their Honours students would consider going onto a PhD. The student survey responses supported these purposes put forward by coordinators.

The varying understandings of Honours, academics' motivations for supervising Honours projects, and students' motivations for undertaking Honours, support the argument that the program, qualification and experience that is called Honours, is many things to many people.

### **Enrolments and trends**

Many coordinators reported that enrolment in Honours was lower in 2008 than in previous years, although this dip was not consistent across all disciplines. Furthermore, enrolments in different disciplines varied considerably, a variation that can be explained in some cases but not others. For example, in Psychology, in order to be registered to practise as a psychologist, one needs a fourth year that includes research skill development and a research project (as prescribed by the Australian Psychological Association). Hence Psychology enrolments are consistently high: as a Psychology interviewee confirmed "... you can't be a psychologist without your fourth year."

However, it should be noted that Psychology enrolments are somewhat different from other professional areas where Honours enrolments are particularly low. This is because of high employability experienced in Australia when the data were collected and hence even without the possible advantage that Honours gives in some professions, students were choosing to seek employment immediately after completing their undergraduate award. Another reason for low enrolments reported in the interviews relates to poor, or under-, representation of that discipline within the university, generally as the result of a strategic direction of the university or dwindling numbers of staff choosing to work in that discipline.

Another reported reason for what appears to be a drop in enrolments in many areas, is

that students are likely to be seeking alternative pathways through a career, returning to study after some personal or professional experience. For these students it is likely that they would undertake a Masters as possible entry to a doctoral award, rather than Honours.

## **Discussion**

The findings above demonstrate that Honours in Australian higher education is complex and varied. This complexity and variation arises from the history and development of Honours, its disciplinary nature, the role of the professions and other employing bodies, students' interests and motivations, and resourcing. However, what are the implications of such great variation for Australian higher education and its position in the world?

Perhaps the first and most obvious answer is that it is not surprising that attempts have been made from time to time by university managers to standardise Honours, often with very little success. While some efforts to standardise Honours are not helpful, attempts to standardise the use of Honours results for scholarships and PhD entry are important. As our findings demonstrate, this is only one purpose of Honours, so perhaps a realistic alternative is that Australian universities could propose a different set of criteria for scholarship allocation. To commence this exercise it would be possible to identify the qualities of first class Honours graduates that make them so 'attractive' for selection for research. Our study would suggest that examples of these qualities would be the demonstration of having successfully engaged in:

- discipline-related research training
- an independent research project
- disciplinary knowledge at a level more advanced than at the undergraduate level.

As an example, the University of Queensland (UQ) has already changed its selection criteria along these lines. Instead of relying on first class Honours as a proxy for these qualities, UQ selects new candidates on the basis of evidence of their research experience and outputs, effective communication, critical judgement and research skills, independence and creativity, and their work ethics and motivation. Also, the Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies is undertaking a similar exercise leading to possible national guidelines for PhD scholarship selection.

A second answer to the question, "What does the diversity of Honours mean for Australian universities?" could be that such diversity is the sign of a system that is trying to 'do too much with one program'. In other words, Honours has been overly manipulated and modified to meet a wide range of students', employers' and disciplinary needs. Consequently, Honours can be seen as positioning Australian higher education as a system that is responsive to, and supports, diversity but possibly at the risk of trying to achieve too much with too little. Such diversity means that it is difficult to communicate the nature of Honours beyond the disciplines that effectively own it.

Our findings also suggest that despite diversity there was widespread, although not unanimous, agreement that the Honours curriculum and experience should involve at

least three components. These components are: advanced disciplinary knowledge, research training, and the undertaking of an independent, albeit supervised, research project. The workload percentage of these three components and how they were weighted for assessment may vary according to diverse disciplinary and professional requirements.

Lastly, our findings suggest that Australian higher education might like to consider nomenclature. Where programs do not include the three components in some form or other, then we would suggest that for clarity, students currently graduating with Honours, based on grade point average (GPA) only, be given their award 'with merit' not with Honours.

However, none of these suggestions addresses the broader question of the position of Honours in the globalising context. Within Australia, internal inconsistencies may be addressed and a greater clarity achieved about what is meant by the term, but unless Honours can readily map on to what is occurring in the rest of the world, it may be difficult to sustain it as a distinct program. Issues of mobility, from and into Australia; funding as an undergraduate program; pedagogy in light of the transitional nature of Honours; and the role of Honours in educating students to be creators, not just acquirers of knowledge are all critical in the debate on Honours.

The obvious place to start in seeking international compatibility is with the historical origins of Honours in Scotland. There is still a distinction in that country between the typically three-year Scottish Bachelors degree and a typically four-year Scottish Bachelors degree with Honours. As part of the Bologna Agreement process, Scotland verified that its national higher education framework was compatible with that of the European Higher Education Area, however, it has determined that both are first cycle qualifications (QAA Scotland 2007). This means that it is difficult for Australia to argue that its Honours can fit as a second cycle qualification. A greater problem though is that the Honours program as it is understood in both these countries is not well understood elsewhere. This is a general problem in the many countries where existing programs do not map on easily to new international frameworks. They face the prospect of maintaining their existing practice and risk their qualifications not being recognised by other countries, leading to their own students having problems with mobility and to difficulties in attracting international students given the uniqueness of Honours to the Australian context. Or, they adapt and institute modified or new qualifications that conform to the international pattern, as is becoming commonplace in continental Europe with the rise of the Masters degree.

## **Conclusion**

Honours, as our study found, is highly regarded by coordinators, students, graduates, supervisors and employers, and yet it is poorly understood across disciplines and outside Australia. It is argued that there is substantial diversity among Honours programs and our findings suggest that there is room for change. There is a clear need to revise the practice of allocating scholarships and PhD places on the basis of first class Honours results and we anticipate that this process will be underway at a national level by the time of publication. There is a need for greater understanding of how and why different

disciplines incorporate the three components, which we suggest are minimum characteristics of an Honours curriculum. There is also a need to distinguish between Honours programs that provide advanced disciplinary, research and professional training and those that do not, and no longer pretend that they are the same.

Finally, the greater longer-term challenge to Honours is how far Australia will adapt to the global challenges of standardisation. Can Honours be sustained in a clarified version of its existing form or will the Research Masters become increasingly significant?

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the historical roots of Honours, see AV-CC (1991, pp. 27–31).

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished report, Progression from Honours to postgraduate research.

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