

Honours: A Taken-for-Granted Pathway to Research?

Margaret Zeegers

Deidre Barron

Abstract

In this paper we examine variations in Honours programs in Australian universities and the consequences that this has for students who wish to undertake higher degrees by research after their undergraduate programs have been successfully completed. Our review of universities' Honours programs across rural, regional, and urban Australia has indicated that there is a degree of variation that is localised as far as each university is concerned, and that there is a lack of consistency in various universities' application of policies or procedures in the implementation of their Honours programs. We conclude by calling for greater consistency across universities in Australia in the awarding of Honours, certainly, but also suggesting that a review needs to be undertaken as part of national, systematic and orchestrated project.

Introduction

The conduct of Honours programs appears very much a given aspect of undergraduate programs, not having been singled out for attention by major organisations in the higher education field in recent years. Our review of the universities' statements on Honours programs indicates a tacit understanding that a dynamic Honours program is the basis of a dynamic research culture within a university, something which has been unquestioned since it was articulated as such in the 1957 Murray Report on Australian universities (Murray, 1957). In this paper we do not question the role that Honours may play within a university and its research culture. We consider the lack of consistency and transparency as they pertain research components understood to be features of Honours degrees. Further, we consider the implications that this has for the awarding of places and scholarships in research higher degrees.

This paper does not deal with the recruitment and retention of Honours students, or those students' progress beyond their Honours years across universities in Australia. What is of concern is ways in which an unquestioning stance in relation to the implementation of Honours programs has implications for the programs themselves, and ways in which those programs are privileged as they provide pathways into higher research degrees with attendant scholarships in the form of Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs), and even Australian Postgraduate Awards Industry (APAI). This is in a context where currently Honours degree candidates account for only 20% of entries to Australian universities' higher degree research programs (Lawson, 2008), leaving 80% of candidates for PhD and perhaps Masters by Research degrees having limited access to funded programs for their studies. In addressing these issues, we have conducted a review of honours programs in Australian universities. This review commenced with an examination of publicly available documents on university Websites as part of a scoping exercise, with follow up phone calls to the Graduate and Research Studies offices. Using purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Harrison, 2000), we identified a number of key sites for more intense focus, with discussions and interviews with those universities' relevant staff, being Directors or Dean of Graduate Studies or Honours coordinators.

Common Structure

Honours programs have a unique position within Australian universities. They are an undergraduate program funded entirely as such, yet they are not only seen as but are also used as a key indicator of research potential. The rhetoric of Honours programs is that they are a means by which future professionals may develop a depth of understanding of their vocational or professional fields. At the same time, they have a rhetoric of their functions as predictors and training grounds of future Research Higher Degree students. Given that positioning, we would expect to see some sort of consistency in their implementation, or at least some guidance or articulation of what this means across the university sector as a whole in Australia. Inconsistencies that we have identified begin with the two formats of Honours programs in Australian universities: these formats are a three years plus one Honours year or they are embedded in four year undergraduate degrees.

Further inconsistencies are apparent in universities across Australia where there is a disparity when it comes to the grade needed to obtain a First Class Honours (H1). Seven Victorian universities, for example, award First Class Honours at 80 percent, while two of them do not award H1 until 85 percent. We categorised Honours programs for 24 public universities in Australia. Three patterns emerged. Eight universities awarded an H1 consistently across the University for a grade of 85+. Eleven universities awarded an H1 across the University at 80+. The rest awarded an H1 grade that indicated a differential grading system between and within Faculties.

The question that then arises is how to evaluate the equivalence of an H1 result to a Research Masters which has an ungraded pass. The variations that we have canvassed have implications for the relative standing of Honours students applying for nationally competitive scholarships. In this review we have not addressed ways in which universities allocate scholarships, whether they do this by institutional or organizational units. Rather, our focus has been on the position of Honours rankings in relation to scholarships. The legislation (Higher Education Support Act 2003) is clear on this point:

- (1) To be eligible for an APA, a student must:
 - (a) have completed a Bachelor Degree with First Class Honours, or
 - (b) be regarded by the provider as having an equivalent level of attainment in accordance with paragraph (3.10.5 of these Guidelines) (p. 15).

Questions may also be raised about the relative abilities of candidates to complete their higher research degrees, as required by the Research Training Scheme (RTS). In our investigation into Honours programs we have encountered arguments which suggest that the discipline specific nature of Honours as part of undergraduate programs means that it should not be benchmarked to achieve the sort of consistency that we have found to be lacking. The disparity across universities in the country with the awarding of an H1 means that the assumption of research capability by such students is an arbitrary, rather than an evidence-based, one. Our investigation has indicated that Honours programs, even where they are categorised and examined as discipline specific, show disparities across universities, and across various areas in the same universities in which they are offered. It is a situation, we suggest, that means that the argument against benchmarking

is untenable. It means that benchmarking is even more appropriate than counter arguments might suggest.

Benchmarking means that all applicants for higher degrees by research may be considered equitably. Indeed, universities have no problem setting criteria for non-Honours graduates, such as Masters. The standard form that we have found in the universities we have examined has the heading *Honours Equivalence*, requiring that a case be made by applicants that they have engaged in research-based activities or that their professional practice has required them to engage in critical analysis and implementation of change that they have in some way initiated as part of their professional activities. Honours Equivalence requires that the case be made in regard to enquiry and scholarship, not competencies associated with particular careers or professions, regardless of whether the degree applied for is a professional doctorate or not. If an applicant does not have an Honours degree with an H1 grade, they will be judged against the sorts of criteria that it is assumed underpin that H1 grade. Yet there is no evidence that an Honours student who achieves an H1 has met those criteria. Universities that we have investigated take no issue with demanding clear evidence of research-based activity in an Honours Equivalence case, but accept unquestioningly an assumption of a high level of research capacity associated with an H1 grade.

Honours may be seen as a program in which a potential doctoral student will approximate the research behaviours of more experienced researchers in a given field. In essence, it is research training. Expectations of any Bachelors graduate is that they have practical and professional competencies in relation to their chosen field. An Honours graduate, though, may be at least expected to have advanced enquiry skills and at most a demonstrated capacity for undertaking research as generating new knowledge, or using existing knowledge in new ways. Such a claim, however, is not supported by evidence. It is, rather, part of taken-for-granted conventions within Australian universities.

Silences on Honours

The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC) publication, *Fourth Year Honours Programs: Guidelines for Good Practice*, no longer exists as a discrete document, and even so, this was a 1995 publication, based on the Guthrie Report of 1994. The Guthrie Report is another document which is no longer available, so we cannot refer to its recommendations. Something (but not a great deal) of the importance of the Honours award can be gleaned from the figures generated from the *National Summary of Post Graduate Awards* (Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, 2002). The lack of current debate, let alone conversations, suggests that Honours is part of taken-for-granted features of pathways through the university system. Honours sits within the undergraduate curricula of Australian universities as the capstone program of a three-year undergraduate degree, or embedded in the grading of a four year Bachelor program, certainly, but there is more to Honours than this. It is a pathway into higher degrees by research. This is so taken-for-granted, it appears, that there is little need to articulate its place in the system. This is reflected in the lack of documentation produced by universities or related bodies such as the AVCC, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) or the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST). The documentation that is available (Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, 2002) shows a number of HIs eligible to apply for APAs as well as second class Honours (HIAs) or better for APAIs as well as other Industry and Institutional awards. It does not give figures of the number of Honours degrees awarded in any of the years canvassed,

although the AVCC (2002) does give a 50 page printout of numbers of Honours graduates, with no analysis or breakdown of the figures involved in relation to particular universities. What is given in that document indicates a 12% increase of graduates going from Honours degrees to higher research degrees between 1992 and 2001, suggesting that the relevance of Honours in relation to APAs and APAIs research project funding is a salient consideration in outcomes for graduates with Honours degrees.

While we acknowledge that the increase is in the APAI awards system, this does highlight an increase in the importance of the Honours outcomes for students, as it is a criteria for eligibility for such an award. This suggests the higher degree by research becoming a more attractive option for these students. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the ratio of offers accepted to eligible applications is 43%, which is a rise of 10% across that same period between 1992 and 2001. The point is that there is a rise in the numbers taking up established Honours pathways to research degrees, compared with possibilities open to students via Masters degrees, for example. It is one point in possible pathways to higher research degrees where an undergraduate degree (a Bachelor with Honours) outranks a postgraduate degree (Masters). It is also one that, while it has important implications for research higher degrees, it is beyond the scope of any possible monitoring protocols by deans of graduate studies. One such dean interviewed acknowledged the implied link between Honours and the activities of his own research and graduate studies office, but also pointed out that any monitoring of Honours programs within his university occurred within faculty protocols and practices.

If we accept the importance of Honours as a significant pathway into higher research degrees, we might expect guiding principles from such bodies as the AVCC in relation to that importance. However, the AVCC guidelines (Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, 2005) focusses on maintaining and monitoring academic quality and standards in higher degrees in Masters by Research, PhD degrees, and Professional Doctorates, stating that this document replaces the 1995 document, and referring to Honours only in relation to its subheading: *9 Support for students*, where it asserts, 'Universities should provide a learning environment appropriate to the reasonable needs and levels of the students (undergraduate, honours, postgraduate), according to the characteristics of their students'. These are the only two references to Honours in this document. At the same time, AVCC policy statements and guidelines (Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, 2004) tend to focus on copyright issues, rather than teaching and learning in any field.

A discussion paper on the Bologna process (Department of Education Science and Training, 2006) refers to Honours only in relation to its last dot point of *Recommendation 3*, that DEST investigate 'the possible impact on four year bachelors, honours years, and one year masters in a current environment of variation based on perceived market advantage', and that this be in the context of 'the current Australian honours degree model (3+1)' as fitting into the model. It concludes, 'Further discussion and debate is required about the role of honours, honours and Masters by research, and on research training pathways.' As the desired discussion does not appear to have been taking place, we attempt to frame some possible directions.

The Graduate Careers Council of Australia (2005) *Course Experience Questionnaire Tables* does not distinguish between graduates and those who graduated with Honours on any of its scales for the universities across Australia. At the same time, the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDoGS) have no information in relation to Honours

programs, and there is no documentation to suggest that it has ever been discussed by them. This is understandable as Honours is an undergraduate program, but we would point out that since Honours or at least Honours Equivalence is the main entry point to postgraduate studies that they oversee, it would be reasonable for Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies to articulate a public stance on the issue.

The DEST website appears to be content-free on the subject, as is the site for the Chairs of Academic Boards. There is a report conducted on behalf of the Australian Historical Association (Millar & Peel, 2005-6) which does report on the numbers of Honours students in History at Australian Universities, but this is too specialised an area to be of much value in generalisations as to Honours Programs across universities in the country. A compilation of DEST data sets in relation to enrolments in Honours programs in Australian Universities in 2005 (Kleeman, 2007) shows that there is a concentration of numbers in the larger urban centres, not in rural and regional universities. The local variations indicate the need for national guidelines and policy, backed with appropriate funding programs, to ensure a measure of consistent outcomes of Honours programs in relation to national awards, particularly as these apply to ranking for scholarships. It is possible to learn from a comparison of Honours outcomes with Masters outcomes. A student wanting to take up higher degree research study needs Honours or some sort of equivalent, and in the latter case, a strong argument for equivalence, especially when it comes to applications for scholarships. In Masters by Coursework and Masters by Research degrees there are clear indications of percentages of research components undertaken by students. A Masters by Coursework, for example, will usually serve as an argument for Honours Equivalence, given a general principle of the inclusion of a 25% research component. No such transparency is evident across the universities studied in relation to their Honours programs. The consequence of this is that the universities' research higher degrees programs are more than likely geared to graduates from their own Honours programs, but APAs and APAIs are national awards, which means that graduates who transfer to different universities in pursuit of such awards may encounter a measure of variation in expectations in relation to research skills training that may or may not be well founded.

As a pathway into higher research degrees, Honours is claimed by universities to provide an opportunity first of all to approximate the research behaviours of those who have led the field in research activities, learning the protocols involved, coming to the understanding that, like Einstein, the Honours student stands on the shoulders of giants. Second of all, Honours enables a research student to make an authentic contribution to the world's store of knowledge by virtue of their engagement with authentic research activities. These are tacit understandings of the sort that Murray (1957) took up in his discussion of Honours in Australian universities. They are tacit understandings that we argue need to be foregrounded and reviewed in current RTS contexts that are so much a part of 21st Century research activities in Australian universities. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) has completed its first wave of reviews of all Australian university programs, and is similarly silent on the issue of Honours. As it has already embarked on its second wave of reviews it is possible that it could have included Honours programs as part of its brief, but there has been no indication that this might be the case. If universities value research, as they are required to do as part of their activities and the funding bodies that support their activities, they cannot with any sort of justification focus only on the vocational aspects that may constitute practical features of Honours programs. By vocational aspects we mean the practical competencies associated with particular careers or professions being emphasised over skills associated with enquiry and scholarship. The research components of Honours programs need

transparent and public address. We suggest that none of this is possible in the sort of climate of policy drought that we have outlined above. It is a question that appears not to have been considered in the policy domain.

What there is to inform Policy

The only real extant discussion of Honours programs is that of Murray (1957). It is worthwhile revisiting that one to illustrate the point. In his report, he describes the university library where he renders a description redolent of a cloistered, sequestered apartment reminiscent of the monastery. The library, is given as a:

place where [the student] is welcomed and encouraged to pursue a personal and independent search for knowledge and understanding, where his [sic] capacities for independence of thought and judgment are enlarged, and where, above all, he [sic] is treated as a scholar, to be provided with the peaceful and uncrowded conditions conducive to scholarly work (p. 51).

Books and journals are not even referred to. Desks, tables, carrels and chairs are similarly absent. This space is not peopled by librarians. The ideal is all that furnishes this space, and it is one to which students come: it is not one that emits the information it stores in the form of borrowings to remote places, or even to the students' places of study on campus. This encapsulates the 1950s perception of the university student. Its very omission of reference to off campus students tells just what the construction of that student is as not able to receive the full benefits of the ideal university education as this sort of use of the library would lead the reader of the passage to infer. It is within the parameters of such a construct that Murray's Committee is at work, and it is a construct not confined to country, language, creed or race. It could be anywhere in the world, with any (male) student living up to the ideal. It exists as an infinitive (see also Zeegers, 2002). Yet this is the sort of articulations of university study that was driving policy making in relation to universities in 1957, when Menzies, the Prime Minister of the time, accepted the recommendations of Murray as to massive financial assistance to universities, which set the pattern for increasing Commonwealth Government involvement in them.

Why Policy

The Oxford Dictionary defines policy as 'a plan of action', extending this idea to 'a statement of aims or ideals'. Even this level of policy thinking is notably absent in relation to Honours. We would ask, then, why is there no policy around Honours and its pathway to doctoral programs? How may this policy absence be justified? In whose interests is it that there is no sort of policy of the type that we are discussing? We might also suggest that there is a need for such policy making now. Policy, after all, drives behaviour, as it frames issues and priorities, including or indeed excluding the various economic, social and political factors which lead to an issue being placed on policy agenda (Taylir, Rizvi et al, p. 48).

Murray's (1957) statement is in effect the only articulation of policy for Honours programs in Australian universities, made in 1957 when the world was a different one from the one Honours students and their supervisors have to negotiate today. What has changed since then is reflected in such government policies as embodied in the Higher Education Support Act (HESA) and the RTS. Neither of these reflects on the position of

Honours embedded in undergraduate programs or as part of pathways into higher research degrees. That is, there is the complication of Honours being an undergraduate program funded under HESA, and therefore treated like any other year in an undergraduate program as far as policy is concerned, while it holds a privileged place in relation to transition to research degrees and attendant considerations under RTS. We are suggesting Honours programs need to be revisited in light of significant economic, social and political change, and the rapidity of that change, as the second half of the 20th Century and the early years of the 21st Century have progressed. Today, we have the context of RTS and attendant requirements for timely completions of higher research degrees tied to funding, and so on. What emerges is a philosophical tension between what has become a traditional pathway to a PhD and the need for some sort of a fourth year to prepare graduates for the more demanding segments of employment niches. The very nature of these two purposes raises issues of pedagogy as well as policy, even in relation to partial coursework and theses that Masters by Coursework and Professional Doctorates imply. It is a difficult position to maintain as far as policy is concerned. Honours funding under HESA and its content under RTS makes it a hybrid case.

Yet we would argue that policy making in relation to Honours invites an intellectual rather than an empathetic or economic response. There is so little data available on the various Honours programs that all universities in Australia offer that it is not possible to generalise, or make valid comparisons: there has been no benchmarking of Honours regardless of the current assumptions around research, the nature of research, research training, or even what makes a university. Yet there seems to be a general recognition that an Honours program is part of that makeup. As we have already argued, there is a silence around Honours and assumptions about what makes H1 a hurdle for being awarded APA scholarships, and H2 not good enough. Nonetheless H2A is good enough to undertake a higher research degree, just not with the benefit of a scholarship. H2B or lower does not figure in the decisions around acceptance into doctoral programs beyond being grounds for exclusion.

This is a taken-for-granted feature of protocols, but we have been unable to find anything on ways in which the various universities quantify the research components of their Honours programs, or to establish any sense of consistency across universities in this regard. We have found, for example, that some Schools, Departments or Faculties require their Honours research outcomes to be based on use of primary data, others that require only secondary sources, and even those where use of tertiary sources is considered adequate for the awarding of an Honours degree, possibly at H1 levels. A case may thus be made for a national review of Honours programs in Australia. There is a number of national bodies which would be well placed to carry out such a review. The AQF, as part of its activities and its focus on quality, is one such body.

Policy, we argue, is necessary to inform university activities in the area in the first instance. In the second instance it is necessary to attempt an elimination of the sort of variation that we have observed in universities across the country, especially in relation to the awarding of APAs and APAIs. The sort of variation in Honours grades is ameliorated in the case of the awarding of PhD, Professional Doctorate and Masters by Research degrees, these being underpinned by established conventions of examinations by scholars of national and international repute in their discipline areas. We have not found a similar underpinning of Honours programs; we have found variations across and within Faculties even when it comes to the examination of Honours theses. Policy making by the various bodies charged with the task may take this sort of situation into

account and attempt a national and nationally consistent standard similar to that used in relation to higher research degrees.

Another of the issues is the current focus on vocational skills training, highlighted by the 2007 Australian federal election campaign and its outcome. With the swearing in of the new Labor Government we see a change in name for the department responsible for Higher Education providers, from the Department of Education, Science and Training to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. While the name change may be understood to reflect the interests of the minister responsible for that department, that interest reflects an emphasis on workplace skills. Honours graduates may or may not want to go on to pursue a research program; they may wish to take advanced skills into the workplace they have chosen as part of their own career paths. This raises the question of just what these advanced skills may be: vocational skills, critical thinking skills, analytical skills, and so on. Honours has a dual purpose, and it is not within the scope of this paper to argue the benefits or disadvantages of Honours as part of vocational training. We do argue for consistency across the Honours field in relation to the gradings awarded to various Honours graduates, and ways in which they may be compared with each other. We argue that, at the very least, the H1 benchmark needs to be scrutinised for implications for policy and administrative behaviour, given the implications for the awarding of APAs and APAIs.

Conclusion

We have represented a number of assumptions as taken-for-granted features of Australian universities' activities in relation to their Honours programs, a taken-for-grantedness that is not necessarily supported by the situation on campuses across the country. The issues that are raised in this paper suggest that there is a need for a national focus on the role that Honours programs are to play in university research activities in the future. We have argued that there has been a lapse in official attention to research and Honours as various national bodies have not been able to address the issues that have emerged out of the implementation of Honours programs as part of undergraduate degrees. Universities, as self-accrediting bodies, have been able to operate in isolation from each other, not having been accountable to each other as far as their Honours, or indeed their entire undergraduate programs, are concerned. Bodies such as the AVCC and AQF have advisory roles only, and even so, have not singled out Honours for particular consideration in recent years. Honours has suffered as this situation has developed.

The current situation has emerged from an historical development that has left self-accrediting universities to their own devices. We argue that a way out of that situation is national attention to policy formulation. As a guide to behaviour, policy may address the variations across universities' Honours programs and the assumptions upon which the awarding of scholarships for postgraduate research as part of vibrant research cultures may be thrown up for public scrutiny. This sort of scrutiny has been absent since 1957.

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