

W(h)ither the honours degree in Australian universities?

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Australian universities offer diverse approaches to bachelor's (honours) degrees as a means of dealing with a range of contemporary demands. These demands include responding to (i) the Bologna Declaration, (ii) tensions between the conventional role for honours as a PhD pathway and an emerging role for honours as professional development, and (iii) the rigid Commonwealth funding model for honours. Benchmarking of honours across the Australian higher education sector remains problematic, much as it did in the 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Council review of Australian honours programs. Little research into honours degrees has been done since that review. Nevertheless, while honours degrees continue as a pathway to higher degree research, other modes of honours and other programs (e.g. master's) vie for equivalent status in the Australian higher education sector, each seeking to adapt to professional development and accreditation education demands. These shifts raise questions about the role of honours in Australian higher education, hence our question, 'W(h)ither the honours degree in Australian universities?'

Keywords: honours degrees, bachelor's degrees, PhD pathways

Introduction

The Australian bachelor's (honours) program is a distinctly Australian product, recognised nationally as the traditional pathway to a PhD. Globalisation and the importance of international mobility have exerted their influence on the nature and purpose of the honours degree to provide an internationally recognised and globally transferrable award (Bishop, 2006). There is, however, a tension between preparing students for a research pathway – the conventional role of honours programs – and preparing students to meet the demands and complexity of the world of work outside academia (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2009; Barron & Zeegers, 2012). While many students are looking to enhance their knowledge and skills in research to understand and implement evidence-based approaches better, they are not necessarily looking

for a research or academic career. Instead, they are often preparing for research-integrated practice in their various fields of endeavour. In response, a continuing discussion across Australian universities is occurring related to the role and form of honours programs, with some discussions broaching the possibility of moving away from offering an honours program (e.g. Schweinsberg, Wearing, & McManus, 2013).

We trace the multiple meanings and models of the honours degree and note how Australian universities are positioning themselves to provide for the needs of their students and the communities they serve. The honours program offers several advantages to students, notably that it is shorter and less complex than either the research master's or the PhD in Australia. The honours degree is regarded as an undergraduate degree, and importantly, this qualifies students to benefit from the undergraduate

funding arrangements. Both within the scholarly culture of universities and embedded in the Australian Government's own guidelines and definitions (AQFC, 2013), an honours degree in Australia is also recognised as implying a higher level of achievement than a bachelor's degree, and therefore graduates may be seen as more employable.

The implication of this situation is that across the Australian university sector there are several models of honours on offer. Some reflect traditional understandings of academic and scholarly progression – i.e. as pathways to PhD studies – while others are more closely aligned with the requirements for registration as a discipline specific practitioner. At the same time, some disciplines do not have honours, and rather provide a professional entry to PhD studies via master's programs. Despite these complex and unresolved issues, there is a notable sparsity of recent literature on the Australian honours degree (D. Boud, pers. comm., 12 August 2018).

Background: the 1999 Bologna Declaration

Increasing globalisation and academic mobility place a focus on transportability of educational achievement and qualifications. The 1990 Bologna declaration provides a framework for this, in its adoption of a system of 'easily readable and comparable degrees' (European Ministers of Education, 1999 para 9). The system comprises two main cycles: undergraduate and postgraduate. Entry into the postgraduate cycle depends upon successful completion of the first cycle. Facilitating academic mobility, both between institutions and internationally, relies on comparable curricula, itself driven by standard criteria and methods to provide quality assurance in curriculum development. The Bologna Process and its Diploma Supplement provide that framework and is now recognised as the instrument allowing global evaluation of qualifications.

In 2006, the Australian Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training commenced a discussion around Australia responding to the Bologna Process. The Minister argued it was important to consider the 'long-term vision for higher education in Australia' (Bishop, 2006), and by 2009 Australia, along with several other countries, was actively engaged with the Bologna Process. The Australian response included the development of an Australian Diploma Supplement, known as the Australian Higher Education Graduate Statement (AHEGS). This active engagement with the Bologna Process resulted in the review of many aspects of higher education.

Of note here is the exploration by Kiley, Boud, Cantwell and Manathunga (2009) of the Australian honours degree.

They argued that the Australian honours degree was poorly understood, both nationally and internationally, especially since it varied substantially across disciplines and between universities. They noted its hybrid nature: while having significance as a 'pathway to and prerequisite for direct entry into doctoral programs', they also argue that it is seen as 'a qualification, an experience, or a program' (p. 619). Indeed, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's commissioned review into honours in Australian higher education in 2008, found that 'honours' has 'multiple meanings and models and the privileging of any one tends to undermine the others' (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2009, p. 2).

Kiley, Boud *et al.* (2009) found that honours degrees were highly valued within the Australian higher education context, but not necessarily beyond. They reported that an honours degree in Australia holds a pivotal position between the undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. However, there are many differing practices among honours degrees. These have evolved in response to a range of student and discipline needs, staff expertise, professional association and employer requirements (Halcomb, Smyth, Moxham, Traynor, & Fernandez, 2018; Kiley, Moyes, & Clayton, 2009). Questions about success rates, completions, projects, resources, enrolment numbers and drop-out rates continue to cycle (Flynn & Brydon, 2013; Kiley, Boud *et al.*, 2009). Many honours programs are therefore under pressure both from within and outside the university. It seems that nothing much has changed in the past decade, with Australian honours programs continuing to be broadly defined and operationalised (Flynn & Brydon, 2013; Halcomb *et al.*, 2018). In fact, a 'climate of tensions and concerns' has enveloped the Australian honours degree for many years (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2009, p. 10; D. Boud, pers. comm., 12 August 2018).

There is much debate about the purpose of this Australian specific pathway to higher degree research in view of globalisation and international mobility on the one hand, and sustainability and affordability for students and their institutions, on the other. Honours programs continue to be difficult to benchmark, owing to the range and variation across programs, disciplines, schools and universities. Regardless of the variation, the common goal is to assist students to transition from knowledge acquisition to knowledge production (Manathunga, Kiley, Boud, & Cantwell, 2012). Nevertheless, there is concern that the honours as an extended bachelor's qualification may not be providing optimal preparation for candidates seeking research training (McGagh *et al.*, 2016)

It should be noted that there are similar concerns about relevance and purpose around other degree programs. Doctoral degrees are also under review and transformation, both nationally and internationally. The professional doctorate is gaining favour, heralding an increasingly industrially focused move towards doctoral education paralleling the expanded collaboration between universities and industry (McGagh *et al.*, 2016). In a period of increasing globalisation and other international social, economic and cultural transformations (Walker, Campbell, Duff, & Cummings, 2016), the important discussion is not merely about the role of research in higher education and the changing nature of the knowledge product (Cashin, 2018), but goes to the heart of the challenges of multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarship (Fillery-Travis, 2018). The important move is from purely academic enquiry, through which candidates make a 'unique and significant contribution to knowledge' (Jones, 2018), to practice-based research. The professional doctorate now requires candidates who are not novices at entry, but experienced professional people (Fillery-Travis & Robinson, 2018). These new generation professional doctorates have emerged to address the growing multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary and technical demands of the environments in which such experienced professional people work (Lester, 2004). This shift shines a light on the relevance of honours programs as pathways to doctoral studies.

Multiple meanings and models of the honours degree

The honours degree has different meanings across countries, disciplines and degrees (Anderson, Johnston, Gunnarsson, & Larkins, 2018; Kiley, Boud, Manathunga, & Cantwell, 2011). In Australia, an honours program is intended as a link between undergraduate and postgraduate research (Shaw & Holbrook, 2006). In most cases, an honours degree requires an additional year of study after the successful completion of a three-year undergraduate degree. This fourth year involves in-depth research into an issue or question. It is an undergraduate degree. However, this is not the only model, and in some disciplines, the honours level is integrated into bachelor's programs as a third and fourth, or final year. Beyond this binary definition of honours lies considerable variation in modes of offering and practice, developed in response to discipline- and profession-specific professional requirements and the needs of students, employers, community and industry as well as scholarly discipline cultures (Kiley, Boud, *et al.*, 2009; Shaw & Holbrook, 2006).

Consequently, the honours degree has been interpreted differently across disciplines, universities and countries (Anderson *et al.*, 2018; Kiley *et al.*, 2011).

The value of undertaking an honours degree is described by Australian universities in various ways. Honours degrees provide advantages both for a potential employer and the student. Successful completion of honours studies demonstrates a range of capacities around identifying and addressing a complex problem, mastering scholarly skills, conducting independent investigation, and writing at a high intellectual level. Currently, honours degrees comprise the primary pathway to enrolment in a PhD. However, while regarded as an appropriate preparation for further higher degree research, these abilities are also deemed attractive to future employers.

International perspectives on honours programs

The bachelor's degree with honours has been in existence in the UK for over two hundred years, having first been introduced at Oxford University early in the nineteenth century (Universities UK/SCOP, 2004). It provides a summative assessment of a student's achievement in an undergraduate honours degree program (Universities UK, 2007). Such graduates have acquired 'understanding of a complex body of knowledge, a wide range of high-level skills and a broad level of experience' (p. 56). There is no mention anywhere of this degree being a pathway to a research higher degree, although there is a clear expectation that a graduate would have acquired the skills and knowledge to comment on aspects of current research in a discipline.

Scottish universities have a different system and award some undergraduate degrees as master's degrees rather than as bachelor's degrees (e.g. MA (Hons) and MSc (Hons)). These are four-year programs progressing from typical undergraduate content to higher order scholarship that bridges undergraduate and postgraduate levels (University of Edinburgh, 2019). The honours degree in Ireland is a graduate entry one-year program, providing additional in-depth and specialised knowledge; interestingly, it is not necessarily regarded as a pathway to a higher research degree, although variations occur, such as the Single Honours History four-year program at Trinity College Dublin, with its final year dissertation (Trinity College Dublin, 2019); the master of research degree is the accepted PhD pathway in Ireland (FindAPhD, 2019).

In Canada, bachelor's degrees vary by province and discipline, requiring three to four years of full-time study.

Programs may be general or specialised; the honours baccalaureate degree has a greater focus on the program's area of study and reflects higher levels of achievement than the ordinary bachelor's degree. In some programs, an additional year of study may be required for honours, and generally a master's degree provides the PhD pathway (ELS, 2019). The higher education system in the United States of America differs from other systems (EEN, 2019). Honours denotes a level of academic excellence as a summative assessment of achievement, while the successful attainment of a master's degree provides the pathway to a PhD.

The Australian honours degree

In Australia, the honours degree has been the conventional pathway to higher research degrees and an academic career (Anderson *et al.*, 2018). In the 1980s, honours programs primarily linked undergraduate studies and postgraduate research (Shaw & Holbrook, 2006); today, the honours degree remains the most common pathway to PhD enrolment, while the bachelor's degree remains the most common pathway to a master's by research degree (Australian Government, 2017).

According to the Australian Qualifications Framework Council, the purpose of the honours degree is 'to qualify individuals who apply a body of knowledge in a specific context to undertake professional work and as a pathway for research and further learning' (AQFC, 2013). It is specified as a level 8 qualification in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which states that students achieving at this level will 'have advanced knowledge and skills for professional or highly skilled work and/or further learning'. Further, the volume of learning is 'typically one year following a bachelor degree', but 'may also be embedded in a Bachelor Degree' as an additional year: an Honours degree 'can be achieved as either a stand-alone degree following the completion of a Bachelor Degree or as part of a cluster of qualifications comprising a Bachelor Degree and Bachelor Honours Degree'. Two important principles are relevant: (i) research is a core pedagogical element; and (ii) the term 'honours' is not intended to denote 'meritorious achievement for an AQF qualification' (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). While the Australian Government's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) acknowledges that honours degrees provide pathways to further research training and may include a substantial research component, they are not measured against their research Standards (TEQSA, 2018).

These statements indicate some of the complexity and confusion that exists in our understanding of the

undergraduate honours degree in Australia. Baron and Zeegers (2012) acknowledge the tension that arises when honours is positioned as a fourth-year skills-based program focused on the workplace, while viewed by the academy as the preparation and prerequisite for entry to a PhD. They argue that these competing pressures for 'advanced vocational training and preliminary research training for doctoral research' (p.35) are heightened by the necessity for universities to provide research cohorts that attract funding.

The status of the honours degree in Australia has mostly escaped review and scrutiny since the Murray report on Australian Universities (Murray *et al.*, 1957). While the Bologna Declaration and the 2009 review commissioned by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council into honours (Kiley *et al.*, (2011)) generated interest and publications in this area, there has been little recent literature on the Australian honours degree. Zeegers and Barron (2009) contend that the tension between preparing students for a research pathway on the one hand and needing the fourth year to prepare graduates for 'the more demanding segments of employment niches' (p. 573) on the other, raises 'issues of pedagogy as well as policy'. This tension may be addressed to a large extent by the master's by coursework and the professional doctorate. However, the honours degree is one instance in which an undergraduate degree (a bachelor's degree with honours) outranks a postgraduate degree (a master's, for example) as a pathway to higher research degrees (Barron & Zeegers, 2012; Zeegers & Barron, 2009). A first-class honours degree is required to qualify for the principal Australian Government Research Training Program scholarship (formerly Australian Postgraduate Awards). An exceptional master's degree with a relevant research component that has been formally assessed and which has attained a standard that is rated as exceptional or outstanding, also qualifies for the Research Training Program scholarship. The difference here is not only the duration of the two degrees, but the fact that the honours degree is at AQF level 8 while the master's degree is AQF level 9.

Zeegers and Barron (2009) argue that the unique position and status of the Australian honours degree should imply consistency in their implementation and guidance in terms of what it means across the Australian university sector. Apart from the two formats mentioned – the three years plus one honours year and the embedded four-year undergraduate degree – there are also inconsistencies in grading and output across the sector. In 1995, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee provided a set of guidelines for good practice for the Fourth Year Honours

Program (AVCC, 1995). In this document, the honours program was described as an add-on fourth year following a bachelor's degree. This committee has been superseded by Universities Australia and, interestingly, the document in question cannot be located through database searches, even with the help of a qualified librarian. However, several universities have adopted and adapted these guidelines, such as Federation University, who state that the document in question was last accessed in 2003 (Federation University Australia, 2013).

Australian adaptations to accommodate the Bologna Declaration

An illustration of the variation of concept and execution of the honours degree in Australian universities is the relatively recent move by Macquarie University (2013) to repurpose their honours degree as a 'master of research' (Kilmeny, 2012). This move was motivated by the University's aim for better recognition of this qualification by overseas audiences, as the honours degree in Australia is frequently viewed internationally as equivalent to a master's degree (Kilmeny, 2012). The then deputy vice-chancellor believed this change would provide greater transportability of the qualification for Macquarie University's graduates and be attractive to overseas students wishing to do a PhD (Kilmeny, 2012). This change was not merely one of name, but one of improving the coursework standard by providing a greater focus on research techniques. The master's of research at Macquarie University is a core pathway to a PhD or MPhil, providing an international standard two-year full-time research training curriculum. This approach is consistent with the Bologna model. More recently, Professor Isak Pretorius, DVC Research at Macquarie University, reported that his University's 'brave but forward looking decision' to abolish the honours degree and replace it with a two year master's of research degree was the right one (I. Pretorius, pers. comm., 03 August 2018; NTEU, 2011; Kiley, 2018). It has provided students with a superior pathway towards the PhD, he claims. He cites evidence that the university's annual higher degree research completions have doubled within the past five years, and that completion rates continue to improve.

While other Australian universities state they are aligned with the Bologna model, many retain the Australian style honours degrees. In 2006, the University of Melbourne created a 3+2 model (a combined three-year bachelor plus two-year master's program) like the Bologna model (McPhee, 2008), allowing students to complete a generalist program before enrolling in a specialist

graduate coursework program. The graduate entry one-year honours degree, nevertheless remains their pathway to a graduate research degree, and the University's Faculty of Arts 110 Scholarship scheme provides scholarships for honours students (University of Melbourne, 2019). Monash University signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Bologna in 2016, and now offers a PhD student exchange program (Monash University, 2016). It continues to offer the graduate entry one-year honours degree, except in Engineering and Law where an honours degree is awarded as a summative assessment of a student's academic achievement.

New generation universities are also reconsidering their options about honours programs. Our own university, Southern Cross University, for example, is typical of the sector, with a range of honours programs offered across Schools and disciplines. All are consistent with accreditation and AQF requirements, and generally comprise some variation of one-year pathways to higher degree research, based on a research project that is relevant to the student's discipline or future vocation. Honours in the arts and social sciences, for example, is a one-year program providing research training in which, while considered to be the pathway to higher degree research, can also enable students to develop investigative skills of vocational relevance, or produce a creative thesis (exegesis) with a non-text component. Honours in tourism management and education are, likewise, one-year programs of independent study to develop research skills; typical of such programs at the University, they are based on a research apprentice pedagogical model, supported by coursework, often with a strong methodology or literature review basis. Other programs in Indigenous studies, law, environmental science and social science follow similar models, with varying degrees of coursework, but all focused on the apprenticeship model. Engineering, on the other hand, provides a model of customised professional development honours. Embedded in bachelor's programs, the engineering honours programs are structured around Engineers Australia's key graduate competencies and are strongly focused on project engineering with the fourth year dedicated to an engineering research thesis.

Health programs provide a particularly interesting case study of the variability with which Australian universities approach honours. While some areas of health also follow the one-year model, they offer flexibility reflecting student career needs. The recent change at our university in honours psychology, from an embedded (four-year) program to a one-year program reflects needs for a pathway to professional accreditation; further structural

changes are afoot as the university seeks to find an optimal way to address professional accreditation. Such moves are mirrored elsewhere in the higher education sector in Australia. Despite having removed honours from all programs, for example, Macquarie University continues to offer the honours degree as a pathway for Psychology registration (N. Mansfield, pers. comm., 06 August 2018; Macquarie University, 2019).

Honours in other health areas also reflect professional development needs; students undertake honours studies within transition-to-practice programs to develop professional research expertise, a practice appearing at other universities. The University of Tasmania, for example, offers a Bachelor of Nursing with Clinical Honours (Transition to Practice) as a work-integrated learning course for newly registered nurses in their first year of practice (University of Tasmania, 2019). Instead of being a research pathway or a professional specialist stream, it is customised to the students' workplaces, and comprises a learning contract, a customised clinical project and a practice portfolio. Halcomb *et al.* (2018) reinforces the diversity described above. In the 'first national snapshot' (p. 430) of Australian bachelor honours programs in nursing, they report on data from 19 of 35 Australian universities with a School of Nursing or equivalent. Four do not offer an honours program, citing low demand, while the others provided evidence of substantial variation in delivery and cohort size. The average cohort size is small (2.58 full-time enrolments in 2016), and programs reported declining numbers since 2013; completion levels are low (less than 50 per cent). All programs include a research project, and some offer coursework; only 13 programs require a thesis. Grading approaches varied, based on varieties of markers – departmental colleagues, other university scholars and outside clinical experts. Many graduates did not progress to PhD study, but moved to clinical nursing employment. Halcomb *et al.* point to the difficulties in benchmarking curriculum and policy development in such an environment of diversity.

Conclusions

This review of honours across the Australian higher education sector demonstrates that benchmarking is problematic. What is clear, however, is the significant range of variation, both between universities and within disciplines, in how, and to what extent, Australian honours programs relate to the Bologna Declaration. The basic approach – honours as a one-year pathway to a higher research degree – has largely remained unchanged

since, and despite, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council review of honours in 2009 (Kiley, Boud, *et al.*, 2009). Despite the adoption of the Bologna Declaration, changes in other levels of higher education programs, shifts in relationships between universities, industry and the professions, honours programs continue to be considered to be the traditional pathway to higher degree research.

However, there is a proliferation of models, largely responding to professional development and accreditation demands, and students appear, regardless of the model of honours, to be using honours both as a pathway to access higher degree research and professional careers. In reflecting on these tensions, David Boud, one of the authors of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's 2009 report (Kiley, Boud, *et al.*, 2009), confirms that honours degrees in Australian higher education remain an 'unsolved dilemma' (D. Boud, pers. comm., 12 August 2018). He believes that universities are trapped in an unsustainable position by government funding arrangements that are resistant to change. Honours programs remain as undergraduate programs, from a funding perspective, perhaps better reflecting the non-research pathways they serve for many students. This begs the question of their role as PhD pathways, hence our titular question, 'W(h)ither the honours degree in Australian universities?'

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