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Arie Kool

Elanor Kamans

Marca V.C. Wolfensberger

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Dutch Honors Alumni Looking Back on the Impact of Honors on their Personal and Professional Development

ARIE KOOL, ELANOR KAMANS, AND MARCA V. C. WOLFENBERGER

Hanze University of Applied Science, Groningen, Netherlands

Abstract: This study considers the value of honors programs by investigating alumni perspectives of learning goals relative to personal and professional development. Using a longitudinal cross-sectional survey instrument, authors track participants ($n = 79$) for four consecutive years (2017–2021). Qualitative measures indicate the importance of freedom to develop within the curricula, stimulus to experiment and shape one's own path, and insights and inspirations resultant of rigorous study. Respondents identify certain learning goals (i.e., ability to look beyond boundaries and show initiative and guts) to be critical in their personal and professional development but question the role of the honors certificate in job applications. While data indicate post-graduate employment (<18 months) for the majority (62%) of alumni, nearly 23% in post-graduate study (a high percentage in Dutch universities of applied sciences), and 5% in trainee programs or apprenticeships, authors do not know to what extent employers use the honors certificate as a criterion for recruiting a candidate. Further investigation into the role and status of the honors certificate during job application is needed, including the viewpoint of employers.

Keywords: higher education; Netherlands; curriculum evaluation; occupational training; Hanze University of Applied Science (Groningen, Netherlands)

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INTRODUCTION

Although honors education seems to thrive (Allen et al. 6), justifying its importance to officials is still necessary (Rook 69). Savage states that

“honors programs and honors colleges face increasingly greater pressure to justify their existence,” and “the pressure is on and growing when it comes to defining, disseminating, and defending the value of higher education generally and the reasons for funding it” (13). Especially, from the point of view of policymakers, the necessity to invest in honors education is still open for discussion not only in the U.S. but also in the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, honors education is rather new. The first Dutch honors programs were established no earlier than 1993, and in 2003 only ten different universities offered 25 programs. A grant program from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the so-called Sirius Program, was launched in 2008 and gave support to the implementation of honors education at almost all institutions of higher education (Huijts and Kolster 2). In 2020, 13 of 14 Dutch research universities (Statista) and 26 of the 36 universities of applied science (UAS) had developed honors education in some form, such as honors colleges, honors courses, or excellence programs (*Honoursnetwerk; Instellingen met honoursonderwijs*).

Despite these achievements, people still raise questions about investing in students who are already doing well. The Dutch honors network for the Universities of Applied Science (UAS) recently wrote a note, on behalf of the board of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, publishing their own, internal, view on the future of honors in the Netherlands. In the note, the authors stated that although honors education had gained a fixed place in the catalogs of UAS, they pointed out that it is still not commonplace at all universities to facilitate students who want to and can do more. The financing of honors programs tends to be a major issue in many universities.

Within our university, the Hanze University of Applied Science, we felt that we needed to demonstrate the value of honors education. Answering the “value question” of honors education can be done by assessing the value students experience while at college and also by determining the value alumni experience in life after college in its the impact on their personal or professional development and careers. In the current study, we take the latter approach and investigate the perceived effects of honors education on both personal and professional development from the point of view of honors graduates.

Assessing the Value of Honors Education during One's Education

Investigations of the impact of honors education on students while they are at college use different outcome measures. Quite often these measures are variables that can be measured within the educational system, such as grades and credits. In 2019, Cognard-Black et al. published an NCHC monograph titled *The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education: New Research Evidence* devoted to the subject of the value of honors programs. This monograph showed several examples of the “internal” approach to studying academic success. For example, Diaz et al. (59–91) reported significant benefits of participating in university honors by looking at first-term GPA, first-year credits earned, second-year retention, and graduation rate. Additionally, Patton et al. (93–114) found that honors students had higher retention and graduation rates than comparable non-honors students.

Glastra and van Middelkoop (37–40) show that the value of education can be measured by looking at external goals. External goals can be personal development, the development of citizenship, or one's economic potential in the labor market. Hammond, McBee, and Hebert (203), for example, showed that honors education contributes to independence from family, fitting into a social network, the desire to overcome life's challenges, and the strengthening of one's internal will. In the Netherlands, Kool et al. (123) found a modest increase in intellectual curiosity among honors students whereas non-honors students showed a decrease. The findings of Jacobs et al. (15) suggest that students in the Netherlands who participated in honors programs developed their cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

The examples we have discussed so far demonstrate different ways to look at the value of honors education during college, distinguishing between an internal and external view on the contribution of honors education to academic success. Yet one can also look at the impact and added value of honors *after graduation*.

Assessing the Value of Honors Education after Graduation

Students do not fully experience the outcomes of education until after their graduation when valuable skills need to be applied in practice. Therefore “assessing alumni's perceptions of a program's impacts after graduation is imperative” (Kotschevar et al. 141). In the Netherlands, Wolfensberger et al. (200) were among the first researchers to look at honors education from the

graduates' point of view. They asked how honors alumni, in retrospect, valued their honors program in relation to their present situation. The responding alumni reported that the honors education they received supported their personal development and helped them to attain skills and knowledge that were not part of the regular academic program. Alumni also reported having landed a good job and a satisfactory income (Wolfensberger et al. 211). Allen et al. (115) found that, in comparison to regular alumni, honors alumni are more likely to find a job matching the level of their degree. They also showed that honors alumni were able to expand their network through the honors program and to connect to their professional or scientific practice.

Investigating the effects on skills and labor-market experiences is at least an indirect indication of educational value. Another approach is to explore the extent to which the learning goals of honors programs turn out to be valuable to one's professional career (Kotschevar et al. 141). In their study, Kotschevar et al. showed that an overwhelming majority of alumni expressed the belief that their honors experience added value to their personal and professional contexts. Skills that most honors students particularly valued from their education were communication skills, professionalism, and critical thinking.

Given our interest in learning about arguments to support honors education, we have investigated how honors alumni of a specific Dutch college, in this case the Hanze UAS in Groningen, perceive the added value of the learning goals of their honors program to their personal and professional development. Although this information is valuable for our own institution, this type of research is also currently lacking in Europe, as far as we know. For instance, the research of Wolfensberger et al. did not explicitly look at the learning goals of honors programs, nor did it explore the added value of these goals to the alumni's professional careers. Our research question is thus: "How does an honors program, and its learning goals, contribute to personal and professional development according to honors alumni?"

The Current Study and Its Context

Hanze UAS got its current name when two local institutes for professional education merged in 1986, but its history dates back to 1798. In that year was founded the Academy for Arts, Architecture, and Navigation, which was the first in a long list of institutes for higher education that would eventually form today's Hanze UAS. In 2022, Hanze UAS was tutoring 28,432 students in 18 different schools offering 54 bachelor's programmes (15 English or German-taught), 19 master's programmes (12 English-taught), and 8 associate degrees

(Hanzehogeschool, *Facts & Figures*). Around 2009, Hanze UAS embraced its first honors program. Hanze UAS now has a system of decentralized intra- and extracurricular honors programs. Each faculty or school can develop its own honors programs within a general framework that is monitored by the overarching body of the Hanze Honors College. Today, the 18 schools host 50 honors programs (Hanzehogeschool, *Hanze Honors College*).

The current study explores the value of honors education within the context of the extracurricular honors programs, the so-called Honors Talent Programs. These programs consist of a study load of 30 extra European Credit Transfers (ECTs); 1 ECT equals 28 hours/week. The extracurricular Honors Talent Programs start in the second year of the bachelor program and last for three years. According to Hanze UAS's original vision statement on honors education,

the honors student is an ambitious and extremely talented student, a critical, inquiring thinker that can handle complex issues, looks beyond the boundaries of his or her discipline, pays attention to ethical dilemmas, strives for added value to the society, reflects critically, creates his or her own vision, realizes useful, sustainable, working and innovative solutions, shows initiative and guts and gets the best out of his or herself. (Tiesenga 5)

This vision statement is the foundation of the learning goals we let honors alumni reflect on in the questionnaire (see Table 2).

METHOD

Participants

This study comprises a longitudinal cross-sectional survey. As the honors programs we examine are extracurricular, there is no control group of non-honors graduates. We approached alumni during four subsequent years, from January 2017 to January 2020. In 2021, no data were collected due to the Corona pandemic. Each year, a new group of honors alumni of Hanze UAS was approached approximately 18 months after their graduation. The period chosen offers a reasonable chance that their initial career development has taken place. In principle, the research population contains all Honors Talent Program alumni of that specific graduation year. The list of potential respondents is based on the one derived from the administrative system of Hanze UAS. However, since this list depends on students' willingness to share

personal contact information, not all honors alumni are included. All listed alumni (214) were approached via email to participate in an online survey (SurveyMonkey/Analyzer). In total 79 alumni responded. The responses and response rates of the different cohorts are reported in Table 1.

The final sample contains a broad representation of the different programs within the Hanze UAS. The average age of respondents was 26.26 years, $SD = 2.95$. The gender question was answered by 76 people (21 male, 55 female, which is in line with the total population within the Honors Talent Programs of Hanze UAS). Most graduates (62%) found a job 18 months after graduation, almost 23% followed a master's study, and 5% mentioned their participation in a traineeship.

Measures

We used different types of questions to explore how participation in an honors program contributed to the students' personal and professional development before and after graduation. First, we asked students to retrospectively rate the added value of their honors program during their time of study on a scale from 1–10 (in the Dutch rating system, 10 is the highest and 1 the lowest grade you can get or give) as well as to explain their rating.

Next, we asked them to describe their current position and whether they had mentioned their honors program on their CV (yes or no) and to what extent they believe this affected the employer's decision to hire them (1 = absolutely not, 5 = very strong). Respondents were also invited to elaborate on the answer to this last question. Next, we asked alumni to indicate how they valued what they learned in their honors program, looking back from the time of graduation until the time of the survey (1.5 years later), and to rate this on a scale from 1–10 (1 = lowest, 10 = highest). Also, we asked alumni to what extent they reached the learning goals of the Honors Talent Program during the honors program (see Table 2; 1 = absolutely not, 5 = very strong). Finally, we asked them to indicate which honors learning goals contributed

TABLE 1. SURVEY RESPONSES AND RESPONSE RATES

Graduation Year	Data Collection	Response	Response Rate
July 2015	January 2017	22	37%
July 2016	January 2018	18	64%
July 2017	January 2019	24	35%
July 2018	January 2020	15	22%
Total		79	37%

significantly to their development/career as well as to explain how they came to this conclusion.

As indicated in the introduction, the honors learning goals are derived from Hanze UAS's vision statement on honors education. Table 2 shows the list of learning goals that are used in the study (Tiesenga 5).

Analytic Strategy

For our descriptive analysis, we combined data from four different cohorts into one data set. To analyze the answers to the open questions, we used a manual inductive coding strategy. We categorized the content of the open answers in order to look for themes, using two independent coders. For the findings to be of use, the coders first discussed the themes and subsequently decided together on their importance (Thomas 240).

RESULTS

Appreciation during College

The appreciation of honors education during college can be considered high ($M = 8.15$; $SD = 1.87$ on a scale from 1 to 10). The reasons respondents gave for this appreciation can be divided into several themes: room to develop oneself, being stimulated to experiment, following one's own path, experiencing inspiration and new insights, getting in touch with the work field, interdisciplinary work, building networks, developing entrepreneurship, creating new visions, creativity, and doing something good for society. Many entries reflect an appreciation of the room to develop oneself by giving examples such as: "I

TABLE 2. HONORS LEARNING GOALS AT HANZE UAS

Learning Goals
1. Ability to handle complex issues
2. Ability to look beyond the boundaries of your discipline
3. Ability to pay attention to ethical dilemmas
4. Ability to strive for added value to society
5. Ability to reflect critically
6. Ability to create your own vision
7. Ability to realize useful, sustainable, working, and innovative solutions
8. Ability to show initiative and guts
9. Ability to get the best out of yourself

experienced more room to develop faster and better on multiple aspects than my regular program offered me” or “I learned to take initiative and developed courage and self-confidence.” One respondent remarked: “To devote a lot of time to development is the norm within honors.”

Being stimulated to experiment and to follow your own path is also highly ranked. As one respondent noted,

It is very difficult to express the overall added value within a few sentences. It was the first time during my studies I was not forced to follow specific courses, I could choose this all by myself, and it was mostly not business-related, which was a great chance to widen the horizon besides following business courses. Also, most members of the honors community were truly inspiring ambitious people with a likewise mindset.

The program is also appreciated for providing inspiration and new insights. One alumnus comments: “So much motivation, ambition, creativity. My studies wouldn’t have been the same without the honors program!” This inspiration is found in the boost of knowledge that the honors program offers “a great chance to widen the horizon besides following business courses” and “[e]xploration in subjects that I found interesting besides my regular study.”

Alumni also mention their appreciation of the support they receive: “The teaching is a lot more fun, more mature and modern.” However, some alumni offered criticism about support: “It was hard to get started and finding out what to do, a bit more support there would have been nice.” Despite the apparent freedom, other alumni experienced too much bureaucracy: “Still, I think there is some room for improvement with the organization (e.g., decrease the bureaucracy experienced with the project proposals).”

Other important themes regarding appreciation are the possibilities of getting in touch with the work field, interdisciplinary work, building networks and developing entrepreneurship, creating new visions, creativity, and doing something good for society.

Current Position and Influence during Application

All students said that they list the honors program on their CV. The answers to the question “to what extent has the honors program affected the decision of your current employer to hire you for the job” varied from 19.30 % “absolutely not” to 20.05 % “strong” or “very strong.” The possibility to answer “does not apply/I don’t know” was chosen by 21.05% of the

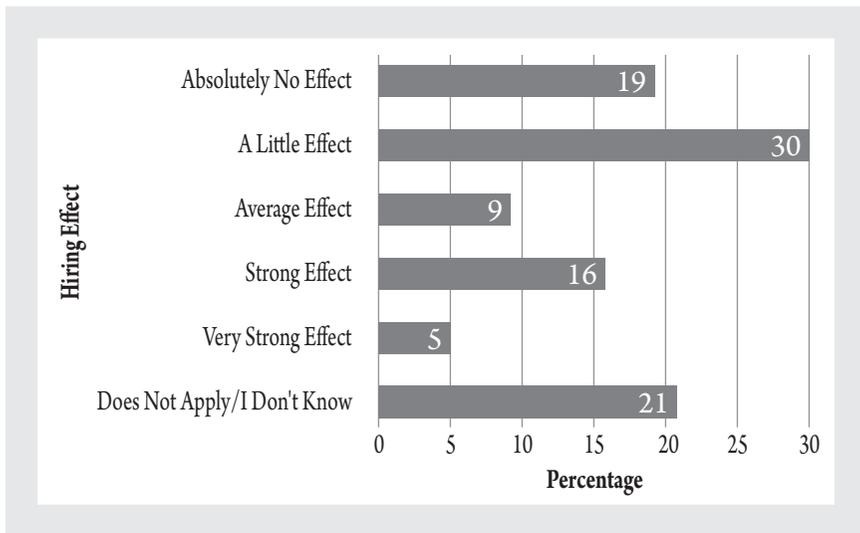
respondents. Figure 1 provides the full range of answer options and their accompanying percentages.

Respondents were invited to reflect on this question. Several of them mention unfamiliarity with honors as the reason that honors didn't play an apparent part during application: "The honors program did not come up during my job interview. I believe that many countries, where honors degrees are not known, do not consider it an added value to a candidate," and "I learned a lot from the honors program, and in terms of self-development it really helped me. However, the 'added value' towards employers is low. Usually, I must explain what it was about and what I did." On the other hand, another alumnus remarks: "People always ask me about it and they are impressed!"

Appreciation after Graduation and Contribution of the Honors Program toward Learning Goals

The appreciation after graduation was scored on a 10-point scale. Here, the mean was 7.36 ($SD = 1.64$). Alumni were then asked to score the contribution of honors programs toward learning goals in relation to the development of competencies in practice (example: to what extent did you develop the ability to reflect critically?). This response was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). The mean scores and the SD s are presented in

FIGURE 1. EFFECT OF THE HONORS PROGRAM ON THE DECISION TO HIRE A CANDIDATE FOR THE JOB



Note: Percentages have been rounded.

Table 3, which shows that all learning goals were rated on or above the mid-point of the scale. The ability to look beyond boundaries and the ability to show initiative as well as courage were clearly important contributors to one’s personal and career development.

Alumni were subsequently asked to indicate which of these learning goals contributed significantly to their development/career. Results are presented in Table 4, which shows the number of times each learning goal is mentioned as being significant.

Finally, the alumni were invited in to explain in an open-answer statement how they concluded that the learning goals contributed significantly to their development/career. The themes we found in our analysis involve personal development: “I am not ok with being average. I set my own goals and

TABLE 3. AVERAGE CONTRIBUTION OF HONORS TOWARD LEARNING GOALS IN DEVELOPMENT/CAREER

Learning Goal	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Look beyond the boundaries of your discipline	4.23	0.23
2. Show initiative and guts	4.18	0.23
3. Reflect critically	4.08	0.22
4. Create your own vision	3.83	0.21
5. Strive for added value to the society	3.70	0.21
6. Handle complex issues	3.45	0.38
7. Pay attention to ethical dilemmas	3.22	0.20
8. Realize useful, sustainable, working, and innovative solutions	3.13	0.20

TABLE 4. NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO INDICATE WHETHER A LEARNING GOAL CONTRIBUTES SIGNIFICANTLY TO THEIR DEVELOPMENT/CAREER

Learning Goal	Times Mentioned
1. Look beyond the boundaries of your discipline	37
2. Show initiative and guts	36
3. Reflect critically	23
4. Create your own vision	22
5. Strive for added value to the society	17
6. Handle complex issues	15
7. Pay attention to ethical dilemmas	11
8. Realize useful, sustainable, working, and innovative solutions	9

I am open to new opportunities, something even better than what I planned.” At the same time, the benefit for professional development is also mentioned more often: “I realize that in the working field I only could have gotten there through honors.” Although not ranked very high in Table 4, a large number of respondents mention the effect honors has had on the development of ethical/social awareness in their open answers: “I’ve learned to take social cause into consideration, but also simple things, such as employee well-being, or finding synergy effects that positively affect all stakeholders.”

Finally, two specific comments are worth mentioning as they seem to illustrate the value of that particular honors period for the students. One alumnus says:

During honors, I got the best out of myself. Now I try to get that feeling again because 1.5 years later it is hard, I lack creativity, so I would like to suggest that the honors program provide a guide “for the rest of your life,” with techniques and tips to use in practice. I would love to have an honors session to regain that feeling, once a week.

Another student offers some inspiring advice: “My advice is not to take the easy road. The easy road is already followed too often and does not often lead to innovation or prizes. Honors was beautiful because of the challenges it posed and let nobody take that away from you.”

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we looked at the value of honors education from the point of view of honors alumni. We did so by focusing on the question “how does an honors program, and its learning goals, contribute to personal and professional development according to honors alumni?” Alumni in our study appreciate the honors program they had followed. The overall appreciation during college was rather high and still quite positive after graduation as well, albeit slightly lower. Honors alumni report that the honors program they had followed had strengthened their personal development. More specifically, they report having gained a broader perspective and developed more self-esteem through the honors program. As for professional development, the possibility to get in touch with the work field, build networks, and develop entrepreneurship are mentioned as the most important gains of the honors program. The honors alumni furthermore indicate that four honors learning goals are particularly important in relation to their current situation: look beyond the boundaries of your discipline; show initiative and guts; reflect critically; and create your

own vision. Two learning goals score relatively low regarding the appreciation of the honors program: realizing useful, sustainable, working, and innovative solutions; and paying attention to ethical dilemmas.

Honors alumni also report that they appreciated honors education because of the high degree of freedom and autonomy the program provided. Themes such as “room to develop oneself,” “being stimulated to experiment and to follow your own path,” and “providing inspiration and new insights” are often mentioned. Furthermore, the honors program is seen as a bridge between the university and the working field. Alumni appreciated that the honors program brought them in touch with the work field, offering them the opportunity to build networks and develop entrepreneurship. They also appreciated experience with interdisciplinary work and doing something good for society.

In the Netherlands, the labor market position of graduates in higher education is monitored by the Dutch Higher Education Monitor. Comparing our data to that of the monitor (HBO-Monitor 2020) shows that the percentage of alumni that found a job 18 months after graduation is in line with the percentage of general students finding a job. However, the percentage of honors alumni following a master’s program is rather high compared to the percentage of regular students; this is especially remarkable given the fact that it is not easy to start a master’s after graduation from a UAS university in the Netherlands (Onderwijsinspectie.nl). It could be that honors education has opened new opportunities for these students. Overall, positive social and economic effects of honors programs are probable, but further research to determine the precise effects is required.

All alumni reported that they mention the honors program on their CV, but the extent to which the honors program affected the decision of their employer to hire them for a job varies from having little to no effect to high effect. The open answers suggest that employers are not familiar with the existence of honors education, which is still a fledgling undertaking in Europe. When employers were familiar with honors, it came up during the job interview as being somewhat important. Our findings are in line with the findings of Allen et al. (76–80) who in 2015 performed a vignette study showing a relative unfamiliarity with honors that differs between fields of education. Therefore, further investigation into the role and the status of the honors certificate in job applications from the employers’ point of view is needed.

Limitations and Further Research

A response rate of 37% could be considered sufficient given that the data were collected 18 months after the respondents’ graduation. During the four

years that the survey was used, it became clear that careful administration of alumni contact details is an issue of concern. Due to the decentralized system of organizing honors programs, several alumni were likely missing in the central administration.

Although response rates could be considered sufficient, it could also be that the more enthusiastic or more successful students were more prone to participate in the study, somewhat inflating our findings. Within our data, we had no way of testing for this other than comparing our data with data on the general graduates. As indicated before, honors alumni were not more likely to have a job but were more likely to participate in a master's program.

The current study does not use a control group, which some might consider a limitation. Here the difference between the U.S. and Dutch honors situations must be considered. Honors students in the current study are following honors courses that are on top of the regular courses, and therefore no comparable control group is available. Also, the fact that we asked alumni to reflect upon learning goals of honors makes it not possible to compare their answers with those of regular students.

The survey itself has some limitations. The outcomes of this study are based on the viewpoint and memories of alumni 18 months after graduation, which may have led to bias in the perception of the respondents. We found some differences between their appreciation before and after graduation, but we cannot explain this difference. A point of inquiry for future research would be to look at the expectations of the benefits of their honors program in finding a job and to what extent the various aspects of the honors experience are reflected in their current working situation.

Implications for the Practice

In this article, we looked at the appreciation of honors education from the point of view of honors alumni, using specific learning goals as a point of reference. This approach has provided useful information about the value of the honors programs. For example, the somewhat lower appreciation, or relevance, of the goals "realize useful, sustainable, working and innovative solutions and pay attention to ethical dilemmas" suggests the need to adapt the honors programs of the Hanze UAS.

Alumni are uncertain about the role of their honors certificate during a job application, and we do not know to what extent employers use honors as an argument to recruit a candidate. More communication about the value of honors in the work environment is needed and can perhaps be accomplished

by sharing honors students' testimonials, asking honors alumni to become honors ambassadors, or designing transdisciplinary projects including honors.

Finally, a useful addition to the honors programs would be to provide some training in the way alumni can use honors during an application. Alumni do mention the positive effect of honors on networking and projects in the work field, but it is not evident that they learn to present themselves favorably during applications.

This study looked at the value of education from the point of view of its beneficiaries, the graduates. The honors alumni we have studied seem to advocate the value of honors. Clearly stated learning goals help honors alumni to self-reflect. Honors alumni also pinpoint the need to invest in honors education. Their appreciation of the honors program and its contribution to their personal and professional lives indicates that personal and professional as well as academic success signifies the value of educational programs.

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The authors may be contacted at

kool13@xs4all.nl.