Honors Education around the World

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

HONORS, PERSONALLY AND PUBLICLY: FROM WHERE TO HERE?

GRAEME HARPER

The first time I heard about an honors program I wondered why anyone would considering joining it.

I was in Armidale, a town northern New South Wales, Australia, on the Northern Tablelands, a region of the Great Dividing Range, an area known for beef cattle and fine wool production, but also the administrative home of Australia's University of New England (UNE). It was very different from where I live now, just outside suburban Detroit, in the USA. A friend, who was pursuing higher education a little later in life, was talking about what she might do next as she neared the end of her undergraduate degree. She didn't want to stop studying, but she was unsure a master's degree was what she wanted, because she didn't want to undertake a research project. She felt drawn to honours at UNE (I will use "honours" where nationally appropriate, and "honors" otherwise), because it offered something like an advanced version of the courses she had been enjoying there as an undergraduate, the same kind of structure, course selections to make, less focus on a larger independent research project, and more opportunity to work closely with professors she liked on topics she'd already been enjoying. She had already spoken to a professor at the university. It seemed very likely she was going to decide to do it. I was curious but largely skeptical.

That was Australia, in the 1990s, in a higher educational system largely founded on and shaped by the British model. In contrast to that in Britain, however, honours education at UNE (and fairly commonly in Australian universities at that time) involved another year of study, which included in this case additional classes and a smaller, guided project – smaller, that is, than a master's project and more connected with structured study. It was not a particularly popular route for students to take, given those students already

had undergraduate degrees (or were close to finishing them), and that they could get the "heftier" master's qualification for what seemed like the same investment of time (and only a little more money). A UNE graduate, I was a fan of the university; but, I couldn't quite fathom its honours route as a choice – not least, because for me the freedom of doing a research based master's program seemed far more attractive, and the honours qualification seemed neither undergraduate nor graduate, a kind of marking of time not advancing in it.

A few years later, having left Australia for the United Kingdom (UK) and now faced with that validation process that countries go through when looking at international academic qualifications, I found my Australian undergraduate degree was widely accepted but not considered the same as the majority of British undergraduate qualifications which were, as it turned out, designated "honours" – as in BA (Hons) or BSc (Hons) – whereas my Australian qualification was not. This was quite a surprise, because the question of continuing beyond the standard undergraduate candidature in Australia barely even came up and when someone did (as in the case of our friend) it was a distinctive, atypical choice that seemed more in the realm of pursuing an interest than making a career decision. I went on to complete a master's degree and two doctorates, but still that international difference between undergraduate experiences and their attendant qualifications remained a curiosity and, candidly, a pet peeve. I returned some years later to obtain certificate qualifications, partly with that global anomaly still in mind - because I wondered if, years back, I had missed out on something.

When I began teaching in the UK, needless to say I was teaching honours students – which meant, British undergraduates (in this case mostly in areas of the creative industries, particularly writing, film, journalism, theatre, media and new media). It was certainly possible to graduate with an "ordinary" or "pass" degree from a British university, but this designation was given mostly to those who had failed to complete something, for any number of reasons, sometimes academic, sometimes personal, sometimes within their control, sometimes not. We would discuss the awarding of "an ordinary degree" at the annual exam board, of any department I was in, at various universities, and the designation was one we always considered deeply and at length. An honours degree was the British norm and to not graduate with one was most often a signal that something was amiss, so we dug down into that situation and discussed it and, because of how it came about, frequently lamented the situation we were discussing was not a better one.

Honors Around the World: Convergent or Divergent?

First encountering honors students in America while on an honorary fellowship in Alabama, I realized that "honors" might sound the same and look almost the same as the honours I had previously encountered, but it was not the same. Margaret Lamb, writing in 2012 in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (JNCHC), in an issue focused on honors around the globe (Long) likewise noticed differences:

> In my experience, UK universities have nothing comparable to a U.S.-style honors program or honors college to offer a more challenging or engaging set of opportunities to a cross-section of the undergraduate population in particular fields or across the board. Once undergraduates have been admitted to particular degree courses, UK universities officially distinguish between students only in outcomes (including exam results and degree classifications), not (or rarely) in opportunities. (Lamb: 29)

Lamb is largely correct. However, her summary misses a few convergent elements that are worth flagging. "Challenging and engaging opportunities" are considered in British undergraduate education in the validation of honours degree programs by internal and external assessors, where levels of study are designated and often linked to perceptions of progression in a field of study. It is true that community service is not built into British undergraduate degree, but volunteering is available in UK higher education and a number of universities highlight such involvement in the university and in the community. For example, the University of Manchester calls volunteering "transformational University experiences" (University of Manchester). British Student Unions (both a physical and a conceptual entity) house student societies and a range of social and informal educational encounters, mostly tailored toward undergraduates (who are, in that British sense, honours students). In that vein, the University of Sheffield currently advertises over 400 student societies and sports clubs (University of Sheffield). In addition, it is possible to take university-wide elective classes in British universities and these, as the University of Westminster advertises, "provide you with an opportunity to broaden your curriculum" (University of Westminster). This is not the kind of structured program of honors education Margaret Lamb has in mind; and yet, these *are* honours students and these *are* experiences and opportunities that go beyond "exam results and degree classifications". So, while Lamb is right to flag the structural and administrative differences between US honors and British honours the situations are not quite as divergent as they might first appear. Similar but different would be a fair way of describing them.

Beyond formal structural differences, where then is honours in the UK convergent with honors in the USA and where is it divergent? This convergent/divergent analysis could stand as a method of considering similarities and differences between national honors models, worldwide.

Arriving in Alabama as an honorary visiting professor for a good part of the academic year, I was to speak on campus, now and then, work with other colleagues on projects, and undertake the research and writing I had in motion. I was also to teach "one honors course" that I could create myself and offer as I saw fit. The openness of this process of course creation was partly due to the honorary status of the position I was to occupy, but also due to the honors status of the students I would be teaching. In general, teaching of honours students in the UK such openness was not common – usually there was a more formal process of course creation and approval. I was to find out later than honors programs in the US often do have an element of pedagogic independence.

By the time I arrived to teach those honors students in Alabama, I had been teaching British honours students for nearly two decades. The fact that the Alabama students were a distinctive sub-group of undergraduates did not immediately occur to me because every undergraduate I had encountered in Britain was an honours student. To call someone an "honors student" simply didn't raise any questions of what that might mean. It was not until I realized the group had a self- and institutional selectivity about it that I began to notice certain characteristics about the group – and not because of the university they were attending or the majors they were pursuing. No, this was a group defined by engagement in the course I was teaching. From every major, with a preponderance of those in the arts and social sciences, as it turned out, these students arrived with a readiness to explore things that struck me as distinguishing. It might have been they were able to see a new face on campus, if they took my course! It probably wasn't that they knew anything about things I had written or even where I came from, exactly. But they have some kind of bond I couldn't quite place, and it showed itself in their responses to questions and their discussion of texts and their consideration of contexts, historical, cultural, personal. I found out later that the university had an honors program, not a college (I didn't know the difference between the two, back then) and that the program was coordinated part-time by a professor in the Communication Studies Department. She was energetic and outgoing and clearly thought of her work as student-centered. Others on campus seemed to ask her things about honors and she, it appeared, was responsible for knowing the answers. Honors clearly had discernible formal characteristics, in courses to be taken

and in extra- and co-curricular activities and in grades to be maintained, that others occasionally needed to check. That Alabaman Honors Director also had a gregarious streak. I put down to me having the more reserved British experience and her having the more extroverted American one. As it turned out, my uninformed stereotyping wasn't helpful! She was in fact fairly typical of honors faculty and staff in the USA, with an element of any honors director's or dean's role being to create social and service opportunities that build on the community feel and contribution to the wider university and beyond of an honors program.

And so it began, after nearly twenty years of teaching honours students in Britain, an equal amount of time visiting the USA with honors operating around me, and a long distant memory of a friend who chose an honours year in Australia over other routes, because it offered her the opportunity to explore deeper, and think more. Now with nearly thirty years' experience of honors, in different places and with different histories and backgrounds and intentions, it seems clearer than ever that honors forms the basis of ideals and ideas that have a global presence. And yet, honors education is certainly not the identical between one country and the next or even between different institutions. There are guiding forces, of course, such as the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) and the Council on Honors Education (CoHE-APLU) in the USA, and the European Honors Council, with its administrative offices in The Netherlands. In this there are elements of external formality, where programs or colleges might refer to the publications of such organizations (the *Journal of the European Honors Council*, for example, or the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*) or draw directly on the experience of the organizational or utilize services where members of these organizations provide programmatic guidance and assessment. There are also informal associations of practices and beliefs, intentions and outcomes. Honors undoubtedly has both a public and a personal countenance - for administrators, for faculty and most certainly for students – and this countenance is a matter of communication and exchange. We communicate and share and articulate within honors what honors education seeks to achieve, and we exchange this with others outside honors, in order to communicate the value and the expectations and the results. Occasionally we act as "myth-busters", in the way I probably could have benefited from when I first encountered honours. Sometimes we are advocates, having seen the achievements of honors students (and faculty and staff too in honors programs), and how these achievements positively influence individual lives, communities, and the educational environments around them.

Honors education is far from the only educational experience to combine the personal and the public. But it is the cross-disciplinary, intersecting epistemology of honors education that stands out in a convergent way, worldwide – no matter what that education is called (honors or talent-development, for example). This is not only a reference to a liberal education – though certainly the liberal arts feature in many honors programs, in the West (to which the liberal arts are often historically related) and well beyond the West. Honors is also associated with an ethos of student-centric, attainment-setting, comprehensive and often creative approaches to learning. Formal statements about this (such as those made by America's NCHC) make much of that fact. More notable than these formal declarations, however, is that when new programs or colleges or organizations (the EHC was founded in 2016 and the Council on Honors Education APLU in 2020) an ethos of honors education guides these developments, regardless of the nuances produced by national, regional or local educational histories.

A Foundational Interchange: Then and Now

This US honors foundational story is well-known:

American English Literature professor, Frank Aydelotte, returning to America from a Rhodes Scholarship period at Britain's Oxford University and eventually becoming president of Swarthmore College (founded in 1864 in Pennsylvania), in a borough which even today contains just over 6,000 residents, brought back with him a belief that the Oxford University tutorial system might be applied to higher education in America to positive effect. When given the opportunity, he therefore introduced what became an honors program at Swarthmore in 1922 and in many ways the rest, as the cliché goes, is history. By 1956 the first American Honors College was created (at Michigan State University) and by 1960 there were four honors colleges in the USA, as well as a steadily (if not spectacularly) growing number of honors programs.

How typical Oxford University was of British higher education in the period Aydelotte was a Rhodes Scholar (1905-1907) is debatable. Oxford, of course, was an ancient university, and bound in the machinations of the British class system. Thomas Hardy depicted it as "Christminster" in his 1896 novel, *Jude the Obscure*, in which Jude, who fails to become the scholar he seeks to be, concludes that it might take several generations for someone of his background to be able to succeed at an institution like that. All the same, during the 19th Century British higher education expanded in

scope and reach, with some institutions being formed as "mechanics institutes" (offering technical and practical science education, particularly for working class men), a push for "teaching universities" (particularly for major cities such as London) and indeed, in the latter part of the century, a general expansion of civic university colleges in cities such as Leeds, Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool and Nottingham in England, Dundee in Scotland, and Aberystwyth, Bangor and Cardiff in Wales. There was also an increase in the number of medical schools and an expansion of the access for women to higher education, though interestingly Oxford remained one of two British universities (the other was Cambridge) not awarding degrees to women by the end of the 19th Century (Oxford fully admitted women in 1920).

Of course, when introducing honors to Swarthmore College (and, in doing so, to America) Frank Aydelotte did not suggest he was introducing a "British system" of education; rather, that he was introducing a specifically Oxford University one. This is notable not least from the perspective of the relationship between Aydelotte's own Rhodes experience, the position of Oxford in the changing gamut of British higher education then, and later, and the concentration in Aydelotte's thinking on particular aspects of his Oxford experience, notably the Oxford tutorial system. Anne Rinn, writing in the *Journal of National Collegiate Honors Council* in 2003, in an article entitled "Rhodes Scholarships, Frank Aydelotte, and Collegiate Honors Education" notes:

> The tutorial system at Oxford dates far into the university's history, although many changes have occurred over time. At least as early as the sixteenth century, tutors existed more for social reasons than for intellectual purposes. (Rinn, 29)

Further that:

> many of Aydelotte's ideas are clearly a result of his education and experience as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, as he was able to distinguish between the American system that was suitable for the "average" and the British system that was more suitable for the "brilliant" (Rinn, 34)

The extent to which "average" here is associated with a certain social class is not inconsequential, and the degree to which Aydelotte favored (and ensured) that honors students at Swarthmore were given access to independent study made "brilliant" representative not only academic ability but of a belief these students could be trusted to work on their own, without the kind of supervision workers might need from their supervisors (or, it

might even by suggested, perceived superiors). Both these concepts continue to challenge American honors programs and colleges, not least in considering and countering accusations of their elitism and support of privilege. The social status of tutoring at Oxford, which in Aydelotte's time also carried with it a patrician quality, makes such mentorship a challenge to diversifying self-efficacy and, as Thomas Hardy's novel portrayed, an impediment to the pursuit of equity and inclusion. These contexts continue to exercise those working in honors education in the US, informing programmatic plans, the reach of student community service and, indeed, the declarations we make in attempting to contribute to societal well-being and social consciousness. As Rinn further points out, Aydelotte also introduced at Swarthmore a system of honors degree classification - Highest Honors, High Honors, Honors – which emulated the Oxford classification system. While such a classification system did not catch on widely across the US, with Latin honors already present in the US since Harvard College introduced them in 1869, it does neatly provide an indication of how features of the Oxford-to-Swarthmore honors exchange potentially challenged even established American practices. The Oxford-Swarthmore exchange, despite its specificity, reflects also on the elements at Oxford that did emulate that in the wider British higher education sector. For example, Britain today continues to offer honours degrees with classifications similar to those Aydelotte found during his time at Oxford:

First-Class Honours – an overall degree grade of 70% or above – most often referred to as a First
Upper Second-Class Honours – 60-70% - referred to as a 2.1
Lower Second-class Honours – 50-60% - referred to as a 2.2
Third class Honours – most often between 45-50% - referred to as a 3rd
Pass or Ordinary degree – most often between 40-45%
Fail – below 40%

Over the past decade around 50% of British undergraduates have received a 2.1 honours degree, while about a quarter achieved a First. To the American undergraduate, honors or otherwise, the UK grading scale might be alarming – given that undergraduate programs in the US tend to have grades more in the upper quarter of the grading scale, and a grade of (say) 65 would not be considered good. In the UK, it would.

To graduate, British undergraduates most often complete a dissertation, similar to a US honors thesis, again showing some of the generally convergent elements between British honours and American honors. However, what this dissertation entails and whether it should be required at

all has been the subject of some considerable debate. Jennifer Rowley of the University of Wales, Bangor and Frances Slack, of Sheffield Hallam University, write about this in their 2004 article in *Education and Training*: 'What is the Future for Undergraduate Dissertations?"

> Twenty years ago the dissertation was regarded as the component of undergraduate studies that offered students the opportunity to demonstrate their 'honours worthiness'. In courses in which much of the assessment was by examination, the dissertation was a relatively unique opportunity for independent learning and knowledge acquisition. In addition, the dissertation was designed to prepare students for postgraduate study. This article argues that the role and nature of undergraduate dissertations has gradually, and largely invisibly changed in recent years. . . (Rowley and Slack, 2004: 176)

Writing seven years later in *The Guardian* newspaper, Mick Healey, then a project director at the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme of what was the Higher Education Academy (HEA), also comments:

> The dissertation has a long life yet. However, if it is to remain strong and vibrant and continue to provide a transformational experience for most students then it needs to evolve and become more flexible. We need to recognise that not all students want the same things from their degree programmes and that a choice of alternative or additional formats, experiences and outputs is desirable. Furthermore, the nature and form of these choices will rightly vary across disciplinary, interdisciplinary and professional settings. (Healey, 2011)

These dissertation/thesis discussions will not be unfamiliar to those working in contemporary US honors education, and perhaps not either to those working in honors education in other nations. They would not be alien either to Frank Aydelotte, in the early part of the 20th Century, when he brought back to the US the ideal of independent study connected to the concept of honors. The way these discussions have manifest themselves in honors education, past and present, is in considering how new knowledge is acquired and explored, and in what ways this occurs in different majors and areas of expertise. Healey comments on "professional settings", inadvertently suggesting certain kinds of theses/dissertations might not be useful to those seeking to engage in professional practice. Rowley and Slack comment on the dissertation/thesis being originally designed to prepare undergraduates "for postgraduate study". However, graduate education and the ways in which it is accessed have indeed evolved, so perhaps a reevaluation of the role of the thesis/dissertation is warranted.

In addition to these thoughts – and in both the UK and USA – the growth and expansion of undergraduate research supports the role of theses and dissertations in the honors experience, given that all UK students are undertaking honours degrees and given that most American honors programs favor inclusion of a thesis. The British Conference on Undergraduate Research (BCUR) was founded in 2010 and the American Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) – founded in 1978 - and National Conference on Undergraduate Research – founded in 1987- merged into one organization, CUR, in 2011, which continues to expand. Around the globe, the Australasian Council for Undergraduate Research was founded in 2012. The International Conference of Undergraduate Research was first held in 2013 (with partners at the University of Warwick, UK and Monash University, Australia), and the first world congress on Undergraduate Research was held in Qatar in 2016, with key involvement of CUR. Naturally, this is not to suggest undergraduate research only occurs in honors programs. Far from it! However, convergence of honors and undergraduate research, the sharing of this globally, and the expansion and formalization of this since 2010 does offer some insight into contemporary honors and the belief in and practice and role of independent study in honors.

The story of convergence and divergence in the foundation of American honors based on the Oxford University experience and adapted, and evolved from that, draws attention not only to how honors emerged from a place and a perspective that offered as much to question as it did to emulate – in such areas as equity, diversity and inclusion and in relation to the role of education in the social and economic conditions of a nation – but how honors has spread globally in a selective and adaptive way. What is honors in your nation, even in your particular institution, might well be familiar in the large part to what is honors to someone in another nation, another institution, another level of education (the concentration here has been on higher education, but that avoids an exploration of honors courses taking place here in American high schools, for example). But even with a close foundational story such as that seen in honours/honors between the UK-US higher education differences of approach reveal ongoing debates, cultural preferences and varying pedagogical preferences.

The Future of Honors Around the World

It would certainly be a distortion to suggest that the personal and public are entwined in honors education more than they are in any other kind of education. Passion, commitment, mentorship, social consciousness and

empathy are evident in a wide variety of disciplines, across the world, in many levels of education and with considerable frequency. Educationalists, by and large, are proponents of these things. Education, by and large, is the location of a belief in humanity's ability to know more, do better, contribute more to the well-being of individuals and communities, support the cultural and economic success of nations and peoples, and come to a greater understanding of what, why and how we are in the world.

Honors education identifies itself with all this. It is in its desire, and willingness and aspirations that it distinguishes itself. It might well be as we progress into the years ahead that we need to redefine honors, to reimagine it, drawing on what founded the programs and philosophies in each of our nations but in what can inform them as we move forward. Honors as it is, and as it can be – a *new honors*, already engaged globally for some time, between cultures and institutional histories, exchanging with each other in a way that transfers what indeed emerged for many of us in the early part of the 20th Century to a truly 21st Century phenomenon that can progress honors education as a global force for individual and communal success. When Ada Long genially refers to "a wide-angle lens on the panorama of honors programs that stretch across the globe" (Long: 9) in her editor's introduction to the 2012 JNCHC issue on honors around the globe she gives figurative identity to the global honors of that moment. Perhaps it is now time, nearly 10 years later, for our lens to be updated to a 360 degree one (the kind we regularly see today in this era of AI), with which we can increasingly see honors not from a single viewpoint looking out widely but from many viewpoints regularly intersecting and communicating.

Here in *Honors Education Around the World* there are chapters representing many places where honors education is found – but not all. The individual contributors also tell their own stories, and the focus and style of that telling has largely been left up to the contributors. This seemed appropriate, given the ways in which honors supports varieties of knowledge and seeks to bring into productive conversation diverse experiences and viewpoints. The era in which we live is also one of regular and simplified international communication if not demonstrably yet a condition of global egalitarianism and coequal participation. The national or regional origin of each chapter will be obvious to the reader and needs no flagging here. What does need saying, however, is that this book came about because of a community of connections – with me reaching out and one or other of the authors here taking my inquiry and suggesting that they might know someone in another place, and so on. This will be clear in the "Acknowledgements", but I also mention it here to echo the personal-to-public conversations in the book,

because these represent how a contemporary global honors has come about. Whatever formal characteristics are discussed - institutional, pedagogical, organizational - are matched by informal enthusiasms and individual creeds and cooperative purposes. There is a vibrancy here that creates a bond of past, present and future, within and well beyond national and local circumstances.

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CHAPTER ONE

HONORS IN EUROPE: PATCHWORKING TALENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

MAARTEN HOGENSTIJN
AND MARCA V. C. WOLFENSBERGER

Abstract

Europe-wide developments regarding the development of honors education and research on these programs in Europe is given. Country-specific factors determine to a large extent how the offering of extra programs to talented and motivated students in higher education is designed. Furthermore, the use of terminology with regard to honors education has a strong political component and appears to be culturally sensitive. This may endanger the growth of honors education, but still honors education around Europe has been on the rise since the late 1990s and its increase goes hand-in-hand with the development of networks and structured research into this type of education. A group of honors pioneers started the European Honors Council. They are instigators of a silent revolution spreading over Europe in which more people feel free to embrace talent development. The European Honors Council supports honors networks to share knowledge and stimulate honors education and perform research on education of talented students in higher education in Europe. However, faculty development and international connections can be strengthened. There is a clear need for more research on the effects of talent development and honors programs in higher education and its 'added value' for both students and teachers and at the institutional level.

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we present an overview of the current state of affairs regarding the development of honors education and research on these programs in Europe. We give a broad description of the types of extra educational offers available to talented and motivated students in higher education and outline a short overview of programs found around Europe. Next, we focus on the research on honors education taking place around Europe. Finally, we discuss Europe-wide developments, including the role of the European Honors Council (EHC), of which the authors are Secretary and President, respectively. In the process of setting up and further developing the EHC, language and terminology have been recurring issues. Therefore, our focus in the next section is on the use of terminology around honors education in European contexts.

However, we need to start this chapter with a disclaimer: to our knowledge, there is no full overview of all honors programs found at higher education institutions around Europe. Wolfensberger published a widely-read overview of honors in 11 European countries (Wolfensberger 2015). Subsequently, the Honors in Europe research project and the European Honors Council have gathered data on more countries, but this is by no means complete. The need for further research on this subject is clear. Even though there is a lack of structured and complete data sets, we can nonetheless still confidently comment on the development of honors around Europe.

2. Untangling terminology: giftedness, excellence, talent and honors

Europe is a patchwork of different countries, with different cultures, different languages and different educational systems. In higher education, the organization principle has been relatively standardized as an outcome of the Bologna Process, which started in 1999, and in which all European countries take part. This has led to the implementation of a bachelor-master structure all over Europe, and to the introduction of the European Higher Education Area. This facilitates exchanges, networking and alliances.

However, while there is a certain uniformity in higher education structures, there are still vast differences in the organization of primary and secondary education and in educational cultures. Country-specific factors determine to a large extent how the offering of extra programs to talented and motivated

students in higher education is viewed. The use of terminology with regard to honors education has a strong political component. Wolfensberger (2015) identified the following ideological and institutional factors at the national level influencing the development of honors education:

Ideological:

1. Culture towards excellence
2. Political views towards excellence
3. Educational philosophy

Institutional:

4. Progression in national education system
5. Access to higher education
6. Competition between institutions
7. Excellence programs in research
8. Economic conditions

In this section, focus is on the use of terminology, and this is mostly associated with the ideological factors.

The use of specific terminology is often politically charged and/or related to the history of specific countries (Wolfensberger 2015; Wolfensberger and Hogenstijn 2016). Different terms are in use to describe educational offers that are meant to be challenging and are available to a selected group of pupils or students. Such educational offers available to children in primary and secondary education are often referred to as 'gifted education'. However, the term gifted education is not used in some countries, because the notion of 'being gifted' is not culturally appreciated. More importantly, in the context of this chapter, the term gifted education is not commonly used in relation to higher education. At the higher education level, the terms used range from 'talent' and 'talent development' programs to 'excellence programs', 'elite programs' or 'honors programs', and have hence been amalgamated under the umbrella term of "educational offer" for the remainder of this chapter.

The use of the specific term is often linked to cultural and political views towards excellence, as well as the educational philosophy that is prominent in a certain country (Wolfensberger 2012). Following Moon and Rosselli (2000), Swedish researcher Mattsson sees two main philosophies;

> In an *equal opportunity* philosophy the emphasis is on meeting the individual needs of different students. Regardless of background the students should have equal access to opportunities to develop their abilities and interests. Within an *egalitarian* philosophy on the other hand, education aims at creating similar outcomes for all students by providing all students the same educational experience (Mattsson 2013, 7).

Different researchers have attempted to label European countries according to educational philosophy, most notably Swedish professor Roland Persson (Persson 2011). At the European Union (EU) level, a mapping study was done to identify terminology (Eurydice 2006). While this was focused on primary and secondary education, it provided clues about the national culture towards excellence and the affiliated educational philosophy applied.

Some examples might clarify these 'politics of terminology'. First, the term 'elite' is used in some countries with an equal opportunity philosophy, while it is controversial in countries with an egalitarian philosophy. In France, there is a long-standing tradition of a highly competitive education system with prestigious, highly selective 'grandes écoles' forming the top of the education pyramid. Obtaining a degree at such an elite institution is the highest possible achievement from an academic and career point of view (Ollivier De Leth and Hogenstijn 2017). In egalitarian Sweden on the other hand, you will not find the word 'elite' in relation to education. Similar controversy, although to a lesser extent, is linked to the term excellence. While striving for excellence is in general a common goal among universities in Europe (and indeed worldwide), it may be controversial to label a specific educational offer for a selected group as an 'excellence program'. For example, when such programs first started in The Netherlands in the late 1990s, the term 'excellence' was in regular use (Harms and Hogenstijn 2001). However, soon it turned out that this did not fit well in the mostly egalitarian Dutch culture, and the term 'honors program' was adopted instead (Wolfensberger, van Eijl and Pilot 2012).

In some European contexts especially those with a strong egalitarian culture and tradition in relation to education, the terms 'elite' and 'excellence' are deemed controversial. The use of terms like 'elite' and 'excellence' in relation to educational offers then easily spurs political and public debate. This controversy is likely to be caused by a mismatch in the conceptualization of the word 'excellence' as something exclusive that can only be obtained by some and by cultural values and world views relating to for example egalitarianism.

Yet, excellence can be conceptualized in different ways. De Jong and colleagues (De Jong, Boon, Van Gorp, Büttner, Kamans and Wolfensberger 2021) provide more conceptual clarity with regard to the concept of 'student excellence' by developing the conceptual framework FACE (*Framework for Analyzing Conceptions of Excellence*). They argue that when analyzing conceptions of 'student excellence', it is not enough to focus only on characteristics of excellent students - which is addressed by the question *who* is excellent? - and that aspects related to the educational setting aiming at evoking student excellence should also be taken into account. Three additional questions, namely 1) *what* does excellence of students mean? 2) *why* is excellence of students important? and 3) *how* is excellence taught? account for this context. FACE can be used as a reflective tool to facilitate constructive dialogue among teachers that work together to develop educational programs aimed at evoking excellence of students. To assist this reflection and dialogue a web application is being developed by Wolfensberger and Kamans (see face.hanze.nl) in collaboration with creative designstudio Gek!

This level of controversy and discussion does apply less to the use of the terms 'honors' and 'talent', which have a more neutral connotation. Using terms as 'honors' and talent' can be perceived as more cultural sensitive – although we realize that both terms can also be perceived as 'vague'.

With regard to talent, it can easily be argued that everyone has some kind of talent. However, at the same time this implies such a broad possible meaning that it becomes, in fact, quite meaningless if its exact interpretation is not further specified. Once a program states that it aims for the 'most talented' students, political controversy is back in the game. How do you decide who is the 'most talented', and should you even make a special educational offer available for this group?

From the late 1990s, the term 'honors' has made its way to Europe, specifically referring to extra educational offers in higher education. In Europe, this term does not usually have historical or political connotations. It is also relatively unknown and in some cases, this can lead to confusion.

There are two different ways of spelling within Europe, which relate to two different ways of using the term. Honors (without 'u') usually refers to the American tradition, in which honors programs or colleges present an extra educational offer available to a selected group of students. Honours, with the extra 'u', usually refers to the British use of the concept in the undergraduate degree qualification system. If you pass a course at honours

level in the UK, you have passed it at a higher level than regular (Universities UK 2018). However, when in the 1990s the term honors education was introduced in countries like The Netherlands, many institutions just picked ‘honours’ as the more ‘sophisticated’ or more ‘European’ spelling although the content was based on the American tradition.

In this chapter, we refer to the American tradition of spelling the term, following the definition of honors programs put forward by Wolfensberger (2015):

> Honors programs are selective study programs linked to higher education institutions. They are designed for motivated and gifted students who want to do more than the regular program offers. These programs have clear admission criteria and clear goals and offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than regular programs. (p. 12)

It has become clear that the terminology related to special educational offers for gifted and talented students in higher education is politically charged and rooted in educational traditions and philosophies. Therefore, many variations are found in the number and types of honors programs across different countries. In the next section we first discuss the type of offer available in general terms.

3. Honors in Europe: types of educational offers

What educational offers are available for students in higher education who are able and willing to do more than the regular program offers? We recognize three types of offer, which can be available to the same student simultaneously:

1. Individual financial support
2. Support programs organized outside the higher education system
3. Special programs connected to higher education institutions.

Following Wolfensberger’s definition, only the third type can be called honors education. However, it is important to briefly discuss the first two types to understand the development of the third type in the European context.

Individual financial support

Around Europe, tuition fees in higher education vary widely. In the United Kingdom, annual tuition fees at top universities like Oxford and Cambridge reach up to around 10,500 euros for 'Home students' and over 24,000 euros for 'international students' which may change because of Brexit; while in Denmark higher education is essentially free and all students receive a government stipend.

Around Europe all kinds of individual grants or scholarships are available, with huge differences between countries. Selection procedures for such grants or scholarships often include an element of academic achievement (usually measured in Grade Point Average (GPA) or specific grades), in combination with motivation letters, CV's and / or interviews.

In some countries, universities, alongside public and private foundations, offer scholarships to prospective students. Inside the university, there is often a 'Dean's List', upon which the students with the best academic performance are placed (for example the 10% of students with the highest GPA). In many cases, this is tied to a scholarship program. Alternatively, a place on the Dean's List can result in lowered tuition fees.

Specifically in the German-speaking countries, private foundations traditionally sponsor individual talented youngsters with a Stipendium. This can entail financial support, but also other benefits. There are also countries where individual financial support for students is much less common. This includes countries with relatively low or no tuition fees, such as the Scandinavian countries and The Netherlands.

Support programs organized outside the higher education system

The offer of individual financial support by foundations or other organizations is often accompanied by the participation in a program or community. In other cases, such a program or community is offered to students without further financial support. These programs vary widely in form and content. In some cases, extensive programs are offered, including courses and workshops, while others only offer sporadic opportunities for networking. Some programs are developed in relation with business partners, for whom the program is part of their recruitment strategy. While such support programs outside of higher education can be very useful for all involved, they are usually not based on a pedagogical model and not directly linked

to the students' study paths and are therefore not considered honors programs.

Special programs connected to higher education institutions

Finally, we find programs fitting Wolfensberger's definition in a number of European countries. There is a lot of variation in programs, for example in the target group of the program (graduate or undergraduate), the program content (disciplinary or interdisciplinary, broadening knowledge, or deepening knowledge), program size (in credits), admission criteria (focusing on grades, experience, motivation and other factors, with some programs explicitly also targeting talented underachievers), relation to the regular curriculum, group size within the program, et cetera. A common theme however is that students are challenged and that programs are aimed at evoking excellence (Wolfensberger and Hogenstijn 2016). These honors programs are our focus in the remainder of this chapter.

4. Current development of honors programs

Honors education is still a relatively new phenomenon in Europe, starting to take hold in the late 1990s. In particular, The Netherlands has acted as a prominent frontrunner in the development of honors offers. The first overview of what was happening in honors education around Europe was published in 2015 (Wolfensberger 2015), as the result of explorative research on eleven western and northern European countries. In total, 72 higher education institutions (HEIs) with honors programs were found among the 303 HEIs researched. Over half of all HEIS with honors programs (39) were located in The Netherlands, where such offers were present at all research universities and all major universities of applied sciences.

Below, we offer a very brief overview of the current development of honors education in different (clusters of) countries in Europe. In many cases honors programs started bottom-up, thanks to dedicated pioneering by teacher-researchers.

The Netherlands and Belgium

The Netherlands is still the frontrunner in Europe with regard to the development of honors programs. Here, the first experimental programs were developed in the late 1990s at a number of research universities. After

these experimental programs proved successful, further development was stimulated by a government support program (the Sirius Program) between 2008 and 2015. This has led to the establishment of honors programs in all research universities and all major universities of applied sciences. Honors programs in The Netherlands show a wide variety of characteristics. Some are purely extracurricular and typically provide up to 45-60 extra ECTS (European credits; one credit equals approximately 28 hours of work) on top of a full Bachelor study program of 180-240 ECTS. Other honors programs replace part of the regular curriculum. There are also some honors colleges, providing a full bachelor program at honors level. Admission procedures vary, from purely grade-based to purely motivation-based.

Within The Netherlands, nation-wide honors networks were formed at the level of research universities and later also at the level of universities of applied sciences. Conferences have been organized on an almost annual basis since 2012. A number of studies have given insight into the growth and changes of honors offers in The Netherlands over the last two decades (Van Eijl, Wolfensberger, and Van Tilborgh 2004; Wolfensberger and De Jong 2010; Wolfensberger, De Jong, and Drayer 2012; Wolfensberger 2015; Honours Netwerk HBO, 2020).

In recent years, honors programs have also developed at the level of vocational education (called mbo in the Dutch system; the national network is called mbo-e) and in upper secondary education (honors programs in gymnasia). More research on those educational offers is needed.

Following the developments in The Netherlands, honors programs have also started at some of the main universities in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). An informal network also exists there.

Scandinavia

Honors programs are also starting in some of the Scandinavian countries. Wolfensberger and Hogenstijn (2016) indicated Denmark as the Scandinavian frontrunner. Following a number of experimental programs and initiatives, in 2018 Copenhagen Honors College was founded at University College Copenhagen, providing an extracurricular two-year program totaling 30 ECTS for (science teacher) education students. A second program started in 2021. These programs are co-funded by a private foundation called Novo Nordisk.

In 2019, the first honors program was initiated in Norway at the University of Oslo. The announcement of this program caused a heavy debate in national media, which focused on the desirability of specific programs for talented students. For some, the concept of an honors program is contradictory to the strong egalitarian tradition in Norwegian education, while others see it as a welcomed form of innovation (for more information see steamtalent.eu). Other universities, including the University of Bergen, are now also developing honors programs.

In Finland, a few small initiatives in honors education were founded (Wolfensberger 2015), while there are no programs yet in Sweden.

German-speaking countries

In Germany, the use of the term honors is explicitly prohibited by law: "Bachelor's qualifications with the addition "Honours" ("B.A. Hons.") are excluded" (KMK 2010).

Education is mainly governed at the sub-national level of the Bundesländer and this leads to great differences throughout the country. In Bavaria, there are a lot of programs, which are mostly united in the 'Elitenetzwerk Bayern'. Some programs, including that of the University of Passau, use the terms 'honors' in its title. There are several programs at universities in other Bundesländer as well (see Wolfensberger 2015); and some more have developed in recent years, for example at the University of Münster (Fischer et al. 2017).

Austria has a number of universities offering honors programs, often in connection with outside institutions and companies. The word honors is not always used, although a new program created in 2018 at The Faculty of Informatics in the Technical University of Vienna now uses this term (Schmid 2019). Over the last two decades, the Österreichisches Zentrum für Begabtenförderung und Begabungsforschung (ÖZBF) has been a nationwide organization advancing gifted education and research on this subject (including in higher education). Among other things, ÖZBF published specific documents relating to higher education, including a white paper on 'Promoting Talent and Excellence' (Weilguny et al. 2013).

In the German-speaking part of Switzerland, Wolfensberger (2015) found no honors program and a 2019 quick scan found no major new developments (Vroom u.m.).