

Honors Programs in the Master

An inventory of Dutch and foreign master programs

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"The honors master's thesis is the first chapter of a future dissertation."

"You learn to work together from an interdisciplinary perspective."

"This program increases your chances on the U.S. labor market."

"With this master's, you become a scientific practitioner."

"The successful completion of this program increases your opportunities to win a top internship and career coaching."

These quotations have been selected from the websites of honors master's programs.

Introduction

In The Netherlands, but also in other countries in Europe, there is a growing interest in honors education, not only in the bachelor's but also in master's. The Dutch government, for instance, is actively promoting excellence in both bachelor's and master's through honors programs (Siriusteam, 2009). Most Dutch universities have honors programs in their bachelor's, or are developing them. Some universities have also recently introduced honors programs into their master's, stimulated by recent publications (Van Eijl, Wolfensberger & Pilot, 2010) and by the Sirius-2 program of the Dutch government. Due to the fact that master's programs with honors are a new phenomenon in higher education and are still exceptional in the United States of America, a research project has been undertaken to study them (Van Ginkel & Van Eijl, 2010).

An Internet search showed 34 examples of honors master's programs from the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy, Ireland and The Netherlands. All of these cases involved special honors programs within master's curricula, some in addition to the regular master's course of study, and others as an integral part of it.

This study focused on forming a better understanding of the characteristics of honors programs in the master's, and specifically on the mission of the programs, the selection of students, the content, the educational methods and the program format. These issues are related to the 'basic characteristics of a fully developed honors program' according to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC Executive Committee, 2010). The findings may allow us to view the concept and key characteristics of honors master's programs from an international perspective.

Theoretical background

In the literature no studies are found concerning honors activities in the master. More is available about honors programs in the bachelor (see e.g. van Eijl, Pilot, Wolfensberger, & Schreve-Brinkman, 2010). In summary, the starting point is frequently chosen in the theory of Renzulli (1978) with talent as a multi dimensional concept. This is related then to the development of talent in the honors programs (Jenkins-Friedman, 1986). In the inventory of the characteristics of honors programs a three windows model is used (Van Eijl et al., 2010) that is strongly connected with the 'basic characteristics of the NCHC.

Based on the experiences and results of the inventories and analyses of the bachelor's honors programs we will focus in this paper on the main characteristics of honors master's programs in The Netherlands, the different profiles of these programs and whether students are interested in extra activities when studying for their master's. The results of the inventory will then be discussed from an international perspective.

As a characteristic example of an honors master's program, a description is given in Box 1 of the Excellence Master's Track (EMT) at the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance of Utrecht University in The Netherlands.

Box 1: Excellence Master's Track in Law, Utrecht University (The Netherlands)

The EMT is a program of activities which runs in addition to three master's programs: 'Dutch Law', 'International and European Law' and 'Law and Business'. The activities are planned in parallel with the regular class meetings and are an addition to the regular program. The program is intended for a selected group of students, offering them a stimulating environment in which they can broaden and deepen their academic skills and knowledge and prepare themselves for a professional career. Of the students who apply, only a small proportion is admitted. The important criteria for selection include the results of the student's bachelor's degree, being open to innovative thoughts and creativity. After selection, a student is assigned a professor as their supervisor. Over half of the students come from honors programs in their bachelor's (Van Gestel, Rijpkema, Ten Berge, Van Eijl, & Scager, 2008). In 2009, 30 students were enrolled in this one-year program.

In two weekly meetings, the students deepen their understanding of issues related to their specific master's course. There is also an umbrella course that is largely organized by the students of the Excellence Tracks of all three master's courses. This course consists of a number of meetings in which current issues and topics which are related to professional practice are discussed on an academic level. Several organizations such as courts of law, lawyers and other (governmental) organizations are involved in the EMT as partners. They contribute to these meetings in the umbrella course and offer these students high level internships. In this internship, students receive special assignments and a special place in the partner organization. This internship lasts for three (at least) to six months for four or five days a week. Students can also organize an internship themselves, focusing on their personal learning goals. Members of staff at the Law Graduate School help the students to reflect on their learning goals and ambitions.

Students also have the opportunity to write a research paper based on their master's thesis, supported by an experienced teacher and a renowned practitioner.

For the faculty, teaching these students is a challenge. These students readily take initiative, focus on their own questions and are open to discussion.

For the final assessment of the EMT, students have to write a reflection paper about what they learned, and this plays an important role in the final evaluation. To be eligible for the EMT diploma, students should have a Grade Point Average (GPA) of at least 3.3 in their regular master's program.

Method

For this exploratory project, a mixed method approach was used (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007; Van Ginkel & Van Eijl, 2010). This study was carried out at the start of the academic year 2009-2010.

First, an Internet search was carried out in order to identify Dutch and non-Dutch honors master's programs. The inventory of Dutch honors master's courses was intended to be exhaustive. On the other hand, the goal of the inventory of non-Dutch programs was to collect a variety of examples from different countries in the world with a member check for confirmation and specific details of cases.

Second, a literature review was conducted to facilitate a comparison between Dutch honors master's programs and Dutch honors bachelor's programs.

Third, staff members were interviewed in order to gain insight into an honors master's within the discipline of Law from the University of Utrecht. Some interviews with teachers were held to obtain specific information about a representative Dutch example of an honors master's course (with member check, see Box 1).

Fourth, in line with the interviews, a small quantitative survey was carried out to gain an impression of the interest of students in extra activities in the master's stage of their study. Finally, 37 master students from different disciplines completed the survey.

Results: honors master's courses in The Netherlands

Based on the inventory of honors master's courses in The Netherlands, 17 honors programs were found at eight research universities and one in collaboration with different universities and institutions. In this section we present the results of the analysis of the basic characteristics of the courses: the mission of the programs, the selection of students, the content, educational methods and program format.

Mission of the programs

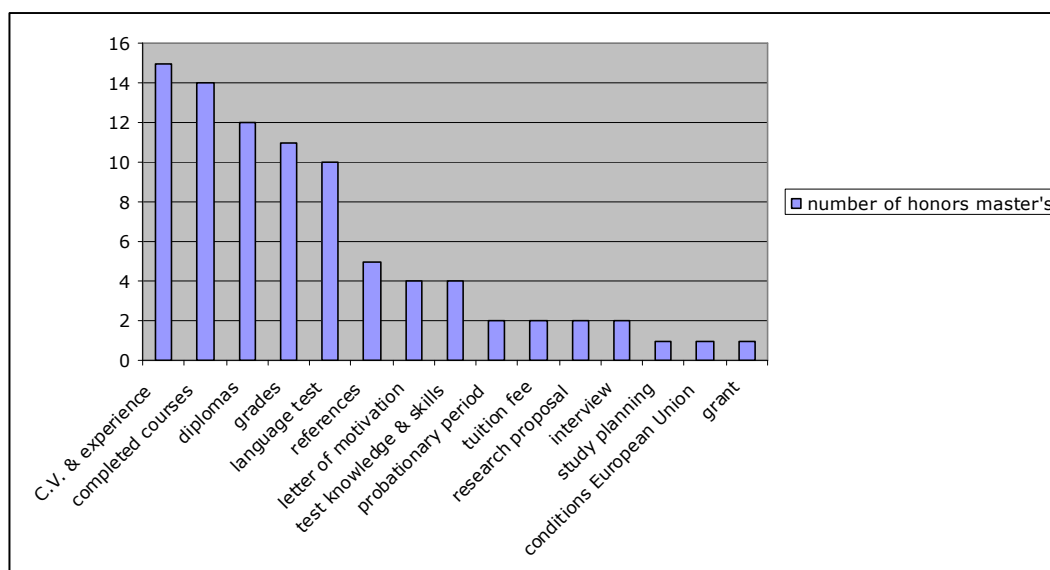
Dutch honors master's programs are focused on research or are profession-oriented. In some of the programs, students can choose between the two perspectives. Research skills are incorporated into almost all of the honors master's courses. In half of the cases, analytical skills, skills associated with academic learning and oral presentation skills are part of the program. In addition, in some programs, conversational skills, scientific writing and a variety of practical skills are listed. A few master's courses explicitly focus on multidisciplinary learning and thinking, critical reflection on the subject matter, debating skills, entrepreneurial skills and cooperation skills.

Selection of students

There appears to be a range of selection criteria for honors programs (see Table 1). In most programs, a letter of motivation and a curriculum vitae are requested. Another selection criterion concerns the GPA of the student's bachelor's degree. In half of the cases, there is an interview. Furthermore, in the research-oriented programs, written assignments or research proposals are used as criteria. For some programs, the following selection criteria are used: a language test, study planning or a knowledge test.

Usually, a limited number of students are admitted to the program. This number varies from 10 to 50 students in the identified programs, with an average of 25.

**Table 1: Selection criteria for 17 honors master's programs
(the case of The Netherlands)**



Content

Honors master's courses are found in the fields of humanities, sciences, social sciences and biomedical sciences. Some are interdisciplinary programs. Honors master's programs often appear in the fields of humanities and biomedicine. These programs typically focus on research (especially in the field of biomedicine).

In order to strengthen the honors master's programs, external partners are often involved. Depending on whether the focus is on research or professional practice, these partners may include research institutes, law firms, accounting firms, government agencies, museums and banks.

Educational methods

In honors masters classes are small. The emphasis of the teaching method is usually on seminars with small groups of students and intensive individual coaching by top researchers, teachers or other professionals. Usually, the honors master's programs are characterized by a curriculum with some degree of choice (within the scope of the research program).

Program format

The extent of the honors master's course can vary from 10 European credits (\approx 6 semester hrs. in the U.S.A.) annually in addition to the regular program to 90 ECTS¹ (\approx 54 semester hrs.). Some honors programs continue from the bachelor's course of study into the master's program. In order to write their master's thesis, honors students often have the choice between English or Dutch.

Three profiles of the honors master's

Based on the inventory of honors master's, three types of programs can be distinguished with regard to their missions. These profiles concern 'the research-specific honors master's', 'the professional honors master's' and 'the interdisciplinary honors master's class' (Van Ginkel, Van Eijl & Pilot, 2010).

¹ ECTS: European Credit Transfer System.

The research-specific honors master's

This type of honors master's can be described as a program with a clear research focus. This master's program has been designed for students who aspire to a career in research. In most cases, this type of honors master's program is part of the biomedical discipline (such as Medicine or Veterinary Science). The freedom of choice for a research subject is limited because research proposals often need to be in accordance with the research program of the institution. Not surprisingly, the emphasis of the program lies on developing advanced research skills. It has been assumed that a master's thesis can be seen as the first stage of a PhD project. Furthermore, a research-specific honors master's course usually has a monodisciplinary approach. Only a few master's courses exceed the (sub)discipline. If a collaboration exists during the development and implementation of the program, an external research institute is often involved.

The professional honors master's

The second profile can be termed 'the professional honors master's. The aim of this program is that students prepare themselves for a successful career, after completing an internship, which is an important aspect of this type of program. Professional honors master's courses of study are often situated within the humanities and social sciences. Moreover, these programs are organized in collaboration with external partners such as law firms or international banks. Honors students explore the business culture under the supervision of an external coach and by participating in honors seminars. In the educational program, the focus is on teaching debating and entrepreneurial skills. This type of honors master's often exceeds its (sub)discipline or has an interdisciplinary character. As an example, the honors master's program within Law (Utrecht University, Box 1) is accessible to students from different subdisciplines, such as 'Dutch Law', 'International and European Law' and 'Business Law'. This type of program often has a dual mission. The master's has been designed to prepare the honors student for a career as a 'scientific practitioner'.

The interdisciplinary honors master's

The third profile refers to the interdisciplinary honors master's curriculum. The core of this program consists of a series of meetings with a maximum study load of 10 ECTS (\approx 6 semester credit hrs. in the U.S.A.). A good deal of preparation for these meetings is necessary. Active participation and a presentation for the final assignment are important requirements. The study background of the participants differs substantially. The seminars are characterized by interdisciplinary subjects with outstanding guest teachers from different disciplines and backgrounds. An example of this type of honors master's is the Hendrik-Muller Seminar from the University of Amsterdam, which is being organized in cooperation with the National Board of Social Sciences. During the sessions, the students hold debates about real themes related to issues in society. Input from disciplines such as social sciences, psychiatry, criminology, geography and anthropology contributes to the discussions.

In general, interdisciplinary honors master's classes are organized by different departments and universities. In addition, research institutes and other external organizations also play an important role.

Honors master's and honors bachelor's: what is different?

Honors master's programs seem to be a follow-up to honors bachelor's programs. Both types of programs are characterized by a select group of students who prefer more challenging and complex activities in their study program. However, there are differences between the two. First, in the honors master's course of study, the focus is on career opportunities within a specific research field or a role in a profession. Second, the duration of the honors program at the master's level is shorter because the master's program is shorter (a maximum of two years).

Finally, the selection process contains a broader set of criteria in the honors master's compared with the bachelor programs. For some courses, there is a strong connection between the honors programs at the bachelor's level and the master's phase. For example, a substantial number of honors graduates from the bachelor's level go on to a research master's program. Moreover, 'Honors Colleges' are not present at master's level as they are in the bachelor's programs of various universities (Van Eijl, Wolfensberger, Van Tilborgh, & Pilot, 2005).

Dutch honors master's: research-oriented or profession-oriented?

Disciplinarity, research orientation and professional orientation vary across the different honors master's programs (see Table 2).

Table 2: Disciplinarity, research orientation and professional orientation in 17 honors master's programs (the case of The Netherlands)

	Interdisciplinary	
Research-oriented	1	7
	6	3
	Monodisciplinary	Profession-oriented

Table 2 shows that about half of the programs have a single disciplinary focus. The other half of the programs are interdisciplinary or cross-sub disciplinary. Furthermore, more than half of the programs have a focus on professional practice.

The programs that are more research-oriented are mostly monodisciplinary in nature, while the programs which are more focused on professional practice usually have an interdisciplinary or cross-sub disciplinary character. Only one program is both strongly research-oriented and interdisciplinary. This is the Exchange Honours Program Master's in Neuroscience. This program has been organized by two universities and a research institute. Within this master's program, there are various subspecialties (neuroscience, neurophysiology and neuro-genomics) that fit the central research theme of neuroscience. While working on their studies, research students receive personal guidance. The participants in this program also take courses which are taught by leading international researchers and professors from the partner institutes. The size of the program is 66-72 ECTS, of which at least six credits should be acquired at each participating university. The selection of students is based on their (excellent) study results in their bachelor's and master's programs, a curriculum vitae, written support from their supervisors and an interview. An important objective of the program is to select master's students who have the potential to complete a PhD program.

The international inventory of honors in a master's curriculum

In addition to the Dutch honors master's programs, a worldwide inventory revealed another 17 honors master's programs in countries as the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy and Ireland. The inventory was not exhaustive, but this collection of programs can be used to illustrate the variety which can be

found worldwide in this type of program. Short descriptions of an Italian and an American honors master's program are described in Boxes 2 and 3. In this study, these 17 programs were analyzed in the same way as the programs in The Netherlands. In this paper, we will describe the main differences between the programs we found across the world and in The Netherlands.

Box 2: Telecommunications Engineering, University of Trento, Italy

The goal of this honors program is to learn specific research skills, taking into account a future career as a researcher in business or as a student in a PhD program. This program is carried out in cooperation with Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa. The master's program consists of a two-year academic master's with a co-curriculum. For the successful completion of the program, the student must obtain at least 132 ECTS credits. The master's is taught entirely in English, and coaching is customized as the research tasks are carried out. At the start of the honors master's, the student proposes a study plan during his or her consultation with the tutor. Six months of this program are reserved for an internship in a company.

Box 3: Graduate Honors Program, George Wythe University, U.S.A.

This university at Salt Lake City offers a multidisciplinary honors program for both undergraduate and graduate students and professionals in the field during the period from January to May. It is scheduled to parallel the regular program. In 2009, the program was called 'Political Economy: Shaping the Modern World'. The idea behind this program was that many professionals lack knowledge about the basic principles of the underlying current economic structures and patterns in the world. To become a 'successful leader' in the 21st century, students must understand these principles by studying eight 'masterpieces' written by academic scholars. During the meetings, participants in the program read about and discuss central themes. In addition, each student or professional receives personal counseling which is offered to help him or her in achieving personal goals. Within the personal study project, specific literature is selected in accordance with personal interests. Different skills are developed during the program to help the participants to achieve their personal goals, such as: 'learning a language' or 'public speaking'. The selection for the program is based on answering questions on the registration form.

Differences between honors master's programs worldwide and The Netherlands

Some notable differences were found between the Dutch and non-Dutch honors programs:

- Non-Dutch honors master's programs often have a strong international focus. The policy of the universities is also aimed at attracting talented students from other countries. The Dutch honors master's programs are usually taught in English, but are less active in terms of recruiting international students;
- Non-Dutch honors master's programs often use a wider range of selection criteria. This is probably due to the need to provide clarity for international students wishing to apply to such a program;
- Some non-Dutch honors master's are not programmed in parallel with the regular master's, but also continue after it.

In addition to these differences, many similarities were also found. The design and programming of activities are very diverse. Honors master's students often work with partners from the government, industry or external research institutes. In a number of honors master's courses of study, the value of the honors certificate in terms of a job in research or in industry is explicitly stated.

Furthermore, the development of advanced academic skills is important. Honors master's programs are present in humanities, social sciences, hard sciences and biomedical sciences. Monodisciplinary, subdisciplinary as well as multidisciplinary programs were found. These programs were research or practice-oriented, or both. However, no internationally organized honors master's programs were found. One can imagine that such a program, organized by universities in different countries, would be able to create unique opportunities.

What do students want?

A small survey at Utrecht University was carried out in order to gain an impression of the students' interest in extra activities in their master's course work. Therefore, data were collected with a questionnaire which was administered to 37 master's students from different disciplines. One of the most important findings was that all of the respondents expressed the wish to learn extra information in addition to their own master's programs.

The students welcomed opportunities to enhance the variety and level of their academic and professional skills. A second outcome referred to the desire for a 'deeper exploration of relevant developments within the discipline' (Van Ginkel et al., 2010, p.59). Moreover, the students asked for more focus on the relation between the current master's programs and their future career opportunities. Finally, the students were asked about how the extra activities or courses should be programmed within the curriculum. The students preferred the integration of the extras into the regular master's program. Almost 70 percent of the students would have chosen an honors program if it was available at the start of their master's.

The students opted for small-scale lectures/meetings, intensive individual coaching and teamwork. In addition, 70 percent of the respondents considered 'motivation' as the most important selection criterion for access to an honors master's program. According to the students, the honors program should consist of 7.5 to 15 ECTS (\approx 4 to 8 semester hrs.).

Limitations of the study

Four limitations of this study will be discussed in the following section.

First, the information about honors master's courses on universities' websites is limited. In the data collection and the analysis process, this study focused on five basic characteristics: the mission of the program; the student selection process; content; educational methods; and program format. Data about the numbers of students and the teachers and evaluations were not included in the inventory.

A second limitation concerns the use of keywords in the Internet search. For this search, the following keywords were used: 'honors', 'honours', 'honors program', 'master', 'master class', 'excellence' and 'honors track'. Some honors master's programs may be missing in our research because of our selected terms.

Third, this inventory is restricted by language. Only English and Dutch terms were used for the Internet search.

Finally, this study was carried out at the start of the academic year 2009-2010.

However, the development of honors master's programs has now gained momentum. Many universities in different countries may have launched new honors master's programs in the meantime. Therefore, this inventory can be considered as an overview of the programs that existed at the time of the study.

Discussion

The development of honors master's programs is relatively new (Van Eijl, Pilot & Wolfensberger, 2010). However, from the initial experiences and discussions in this study, some points for discussion have been formulated in case an honors master's program is introduced at a university.

1. Honors master's program or honors designation?

The Internet search revealed that a substantial number of universities have a special honors program above or after the regular program, requiring students to complete specified curricular or co-curricular outcomes beyond standard components of the master's degree. Some had an integrated full-time honors master's program. On the basis of information from the Internet, we omitted master's courses of study which are awarded with "honors" as a recognition of particular merit on the diploma, as opposed to organized, programmatic "honors" enhancements to teaching and learning. A more elaborate approach with questionnaires and interviews may reveal more detailed features and differences between the ways in which the term "honors" is used in master's programs.

2. What are the characteristics of the existing honors master's programs across the world?

Honors master's programs in different countries have some common characteristics. They are often programs which exist in addition to the regular master's program. The expectation is that international exchange and cooperation with external partners will be valuable.

3. Disciplinary or interdisciplinary?

Many honors master's programs are discipline-oriented. Many scientific breakthroughs, however, happen at the interface between different branches of science or between the sciences and other fields of knowledge. An interdisciplinary honors master's program is a better way to educate future innovative professionals and scientists. An emphasis on multidisciplinary, instead of focusing on a specific discipline, can add value to these programs.

4. Selection by zeal or creativity?

A high GPA and motivation seem to be important criteria for selecting students for an honors master's program. Factors such as creativity and initiative, which are important for productive and creative professionals/scientists (Renzulli, 1978; Jenkins-Friedman, 1986; Friedman & Jenkins-Friedman, 1986), are only occasionally and indirectly addressed. For instance, a demand for extra-curricular activities, community service and publications was not found in the description of the criteria. However, many good students are intrinsically motivated and more interested in learning content than in simply achieving high grades.

5. Do programs with strong relationships with external partners interfere with independent research in academia?

Many honors master's programs cooperate with external partners such as banks, insurance companies and research institutes. This cooperation may be a 'window to the world', but to what extent does this lead to researchers being dependent on their external partners? To what extent can the institution guarantee the supervision of the learning activities, the quality of the results and the assessment of the students?

6. What type of community building?

Community building was identified as a very important characteristic of the honors bachelor's programs (Van Eijl et al., 2010). Both students and teachers mentioned frequently the importance of communities for the main aims of the programs, and also observations showed the productive interactions in communities between students and teachers (and external experts). To what extent will honors master's students form their own honors community, or will they merge with the academic community or the professional community? What are the main characteristics of a community within the honors master's course? This is specifically an issue because, in many honors programs, students from different disciplines are enrolled, and they work with external partners in an

international context. In this case, guidelines and criteria for the successful development of an honors community are important.

Concluding remarks

Our search revealed the existence of different kind of honors master's programs, not only in The Netherlands (our primary focus) but also in the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy and Ireland. These honors master's programs are found in the humanities, social sciences, hard sciences and professional schools. These programs are divers with respect to content, focus and way of scheduling and are, as far as we could trace, very new. Several points of discussion are however still open and can be a starting point for further research. The emergence of honors master's programs shows a new focus in promoting excellence in university teaching and learning, now also at the master's level.

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