

Pulling and pushing talents. Identifying factors in an honours programme context that need management

Cor J.M. Suhre & Ellen P.W.A. Jansen, University Centre for Learning and Teaching,
University of Groningen, the Netherlands

Abstract

In 2010 the University of Groningen introduced a university wide honours track for undergraduate students. The aim of the track is to offer talented first year students from different disciplines more opportunities to become excellent researchers or leaders in society in the long run. The experiences, persistence and achievements of students who were admitted to the track were evaluated using registered data about performance and enrolment as well as survey and interview data.

The results indicate that most students kept a high level of performance in the regular degree programme and were able to deal with the additional workload of the honours track. About 10 percent of the students dropped out before the start of the second year. The main reasons for dropout turn out to be dissatisfaction with certain course units, disappointment about the expected personal benefits and the amount of academic stress that students experience.

Introduction

A recent trend in Dutch higher education institutions is the introduction of undergraduate honours tracks. Most of these honours tracks are closely linked to a specific degree programme. In 2010 the University of Groningen introduced a special type of honours track for bachelor students from different disciplines. The programme for this track is based on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model by Renzulli (2000) and it is delivered within a separate 'Honours College (HC)' setting. The programme combines discipline related courses with interdisciplinary courses and talent career support. This programme formula has the distinct advantage that from the first year on talented students receive opportunities to attend courses to deepen their disciplinary knowledge as well as courses to elaborate on this knowledge by attending classes that deal with certain topics from an interdisciplinary stance. Besides these 'deepening' and 'broadening' courses students receive career support and training in academic writing and debating skills. The honours track allows students to attend education with talented peers in honours classes as well as with peers in classes of the regular programme. First year students who apply for this honours track are screened on two criteria: excellent performance during the first semester of their bachelor degree and appropriate motivation. It is expected that students who are admitted to this track continue to obtain high grades on their exams and complete both the bachelor and the honours programme in a period of three years time.

Besides offering talented first year students more opportunities to develop themselves academically, another reason behind the implementation of a university wide honours track is that it can act as a lever for enhancing a more performance oriented study culture within the

whole institution. As a by-product the honours track may yield motivating instruction practices that can be transferred to instruction practices in regular bachelor courses. Concerning the implementation of the honours track and its consequences for students there are three issues which we will explore here. The first issue is the impact of engagement in the honours track on students' academic performance and study progress during the first year of their regular degree programme. The second issue is the identification of conditions that might undermine the performance of honours students in their regular programme and their persistence in the honours track. The third issue is the identification of factors that contribute to differences between male and female students in their engagement and success. The specific questions we seek to answer in this presentation are:

1. Do honours students differ in academic performance and study progress from students with a comparable level of competence who did not opt for an honours track?
2. Which factors facilitate or undermine honours students' academic performance in their regular bachelor programme and their persistence in the honours track?
3. Do female honours students differ from male students in their experiences, time management and academic performance in their regular bachelor programme and in their persistence in the honours track?

Setting and theoretical background for this study

The Honours College selection scheme

The HC offers an extracurricular programme available only to excellent students. Near the end of the first semester of the Bachelor's programme, the top 10% best performing students within each degree programme is determined. These students receive a letter from the dean of the Honours College with the request to apply for a place in the honours programme. Students who do not fall into the top 10% may also apply for a place on the honours programme. The guiding principles in the selection are student's performance during the first semester, whether a student shows to be intrinsically motivated and shows interests in fulfilling a leading role in science or society in the long run. There are quotas for degree programmes based on the total number of students that are enrolled. The aim is to enrol a maximum of 250 full-time students. In 2010 215 students started the track. The enrolment rate for first year students was 3.8 percent of the total first year population and did not differ between male and female students.

Factors assumed to influence persistence and performance

Former studies have shown that student persistence in a regular degree programme largely depends on students' satisfaction with the study contents, study activities and study achievements. Students' achievements and progress in turn depends on students' study capacity, the motivation to attend tutorials and their actual study behaviour (Yorke, 1997; Suhre et al., 2007). We suspect that in an honours degree programme differences between students in study capacity may be less important threats to their persistence, whereas concerns about the usefulness of the HC activities, student ambitions, the availability of community interactions and the extent to which students feel themselves capable of avoiding too much academic pressure (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010) may be much more important. In our study we therefore focused on the following factors.

Perceived usefulness of honours courses and perceived career benefits

Students may differ in the value they attach to different parts of the honours programme (the broadening and deepening part and the career support activities). Many studies have shown that the perceived usefulness may motivate students to reconsider prior decisions about involvement and persistence in the honours college. In this contribution we make a distinction between the perceived value of education goals and personal benefits for students.

Student ambitions

In this study we evaluated the role of students' performance ambitions for several reasons. First, performance approach goals are related to higher grades on exams. Second, higher grades in turn increase student's self-confidence. Third, by adopting performance goals students choose to aggrandize one's ability status at the expense of peers (Covington, 2000). It is therefore to be expected that more ambitious honours students develop more confidence and a positive image of themselves and their achievement in the regular bachelor programme stays at the previous high level.

Available time and origination of academic pressure

Although high ambitions may have positive outcomes for students, there may also personal 'costs' involved. An additional honours track requires additional time for lectures to attend as well as additional time for self study. This demands excellent time management with which many first-year students experience difficulties with (van der Meer, Jansen & Torenbeek, 2010). A high workload in combination with difficulties with time management may result in students experiencing strain and stress. This may lead students to seriously reconsider the advantages of participating in the HC and evaluate options for stress reduction. In order to control the bearable amount of work students' options are limited. Honours students cannot resort to letting examination opportunities pass them by, since timely completion of their regular study is condition to attend the honours track. This may lead to student dropout.

Social integration within the HC context

For students, participation in the HC means entering a new world that may provide both challenges and threats. It is important that students perceive the honours context as a challenging context that stimulates them to adopt mastery and performance goals. Social interactions within the honours context that contribute to students' goal commitment may therefore become elements in students' considerations to persist or to dropout (Tinto, 1993). For this reason we evaluate the effects of students' perceptions of social integration.

Honours College satisfaction

Honours students are selected on their intrinsic motivation, because intrinsic motivation is seen as a precondition for active engagement. However, when expectations about course units are not fully met, a high level of task intrinsic motivation may turn into a threat to students' persistence. Students who feel disappointed may then start considering commencing a second degree programme as an alternative to the honours track.

Method

Population, data collection and response

215 First-year honours students received an email containing a request to fill in an electronic questionnaire about their experiences with the honours course units. A total of 102 students completed the questionnaire (47 percent). Although there is a slight variation in the response percentages between faculties the differences in response percentages were not significant. The same applies to the difference in response between men (46%) and women (48%).

Instruments

In this study a questionnaire and interviews were used to collect data about students' experiences with the HC. The questionnaire contains sets of propositions and opinions, and questions by which student characteristics were measured.

The satisfaction about the deepening and general courses (including the career activities) was measured by having students rate their satisfaction on a scale from 1-10. Students' ambitions, perceived value of academic qualities development, perceived career benefits, and overall satisfaction was measured by means of Likert type rating scales. The indications for reliability ranging from relatively low (0.64) to good (0.90).

Analyses

The central questions concern the level of academic performance and the level of satisfaction since both factors are conditional for student persistence. The relevant question concerning the level of performance was analysed by comparing HC-students performance after their entrance with that of students who were invited to apply but did not respond to this invitation. To answer this question we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance with average grades and total number of credit points in the first and second semester as dependent variables. We compared three groups: students who were invited for HC-participation based on their performance, but did not answer the invitation to reflect, students who were invited and who were admitted and finally students who were not invited, but were admitted on a wild card after a selection interview. We subsequently analysed which factors facilitate or undermine students' overall satisfaction with the honours track. This was done by means of regression analyses. A causal analysis was undertaken to get an in depth picture about the impact of factors that facilitate or undermine the achievement of the fresh honours students and their persistence in the honours track. A correlation matrix with the variables mentioned forms the base for the path analysis made by the computer programme LISREL VIII.

Results

Data on students' performance shows that the first cohort honours students continued to perform at the same high level in their regular degree programme. Honours students who were not invited but were nonetheless accepted following their application even made more study progress and obtained significantly higher grades than before. A causal path analysis showed us which factors affected students' study behaviour, their academic performance in their regular study as well as their satisfaction with participation in the HC. The model explained 40 percent of the variance in satisfaction with the decision to participate in the HC and 13 percent of the variance in students' grades. As expected, student's performance

ambitions and allocated time to study activities predicted the level of grades students obtained on in their exams of their regular bachelor degree programme. The model showed that it is important that the regular bachelor programme schedule is in agreement with the HC activities, to prevent academic pressure from becoming extreme. To avoid a drop in the academic performance in the regular bachelor degree programme as a consequence of participation in the HC it is important to take into account not only intrinsic motivation and past performance, but also students performance aspirations when selecting for participation in the HC. Although academic performance did not differ between male and female students, female students experienced more personal and academic benefits from participation in the honours track than male students. Female students did also experience somewhat more academic pressure than male students.

References

- Covington, M.V. (2000). Goal theory, motivation, and school achievement: an integrative review. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 51,171-200.
- Kift, S., Nelson, K. & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition Pedagogy: A Third Generation approach to FYE - A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1). 1-20.
- Suhre, C.J.M., Jansen, E.P.W.A., Harskamp, E.G. (2007). Impact of degree program satisfaction on the persistence of college students. *Higher Education*, 54(2), 207-226.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Renzulli, J.S. (2000) The identification and development of giftedness as a paradigm for school reform. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 9(2), 95-114.
- Van der Meer, Jansen, E. & Torenbeek, M. (2010). 'It's almost a mindset that teachers need to change': first-year students' need to be inducted into time management. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(7), 777 – 791.
- Yorke,M. (1999). *Leaving early: undergraduate non-completion in higher education*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Session time table

Introduction to the honours track design and critical implementation factors	7 minutes
Discussion about the university wide track design	5 minutes
Research considerations and actual research method	2 minutes
Presentation of the research results	6 minutes
General discussion	10 minutes