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Note

Excellence in Arts Education: A Benchmark Research

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1. Introduction: A Paradox

At the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam (the Netherlands), we have been struggling for some time now with the questions: How does the honours programme² distinguish itself from the regular curriculum? Art education specialises in talent development, unlike the majority of higher education programmes. Students are selected at the gate on their visual skills and creative capacity. Likely as a result of this unique position, my colleagues and I experience that our students have an above average level of intrinsic motivation and task dedication – two defining characteristics of excellent students – when compared with their peers at other institutes. Though this seems to suggest that all our students are potential honours students, in practice we do observe the need for greater differentiation. Here we arrived at a paradoxical question: How is it possible to design honours education for specifically-talented students? Notably, no literature could be found on this subject.

The research therefore had a threefold aim: 1) to create a frame of reference for honours and/or excellence in arts education; 2) to visualise the position of the honours programme at the Willem de Kooning Academy vis-à-vis its discipline-specific partners in the Netherlands as well as abroad; and 3) to create a tentative understanding of the authenticity of honours education in the arts.

2. Methodology and Limitations

In order to gain insight into the field of honours education at universities for the arts, a benchmark research study was carried out. In this research, the websites of Dutch universities for the arts were compared with those from art academies, conservatories, and institutes for performing arts in the United States. The choice for conducting a comparative

analysis between the Netherlands and the US was based on a limitation found with regard to the initial research premise, which is explained in the next paragraph. With regard to the latter a selection was made to create a sample size numerically similar to the Netherlands. Institutes were compared and contrasted based on key words in their texts as well as on their statements regarding the characteristics of the honours student and the didactics of the programme (see: Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 23-46; Kazemier et al., 2014; and, Tiesinga & Wolfensberger, 2014, p. 14). The result is an inventory on the current state of honours programmes in arts education.

There are three notable limitations to the scope of this research. First of all, the study did not engage with any explanatory literature in order to interpret its results. Secondly, it was initially designed to include European as well as non-Western universities for the arts. Within the partner network of the Willem de Kooning Academy, however, no such institutes were found to have honours programmes, or their websites were inaccessible as a result of language barriers. Universities in the United Kingdom were excluded from the survey. In the UK, honours degrees are primarily awarded on the basis of a student's grade average. The recent concerns raised by the UK Secretary of Education Damian Hinds regarding the inflation of these grades arguably call into question the standing of UK honours trajectories (Department of Education, 2019). They have therefore not been taken into consideration. Lastly, in order to create the sample of American universities, data were used from the QS World University Ranking, as well as niche.com (Colliers, 2019) and onestageblog.com (Peterson, 2018). Multiple sources were consulted because there seems to be no single authoritative and representative list available on all these disciplines.

3. Findings

To start with numbers: In the Netherlands, 4 out of 10 public art academies facilitate an honours programme, compared to only one conservatory, and none of the departments for dance or theatre. In the United States, 6 of the 16 researched art academies provide an honors program, with 2 academies more offering a course closely related to honours education. In addition, 4 of the 10 researched American conservatories and theatre schools have an honors trajectory. And, lastly, 3 out of 10 dance academies state an honors program on their website (see table 1). With regard to the latter two, however, all except one university refer to a university-broad programme that is neither further elaborated upon nor in any way specific to theatre or dance education. These have therefore not been taken into account for the analysis.

Within music education, "honours" or "excellence" seems to be exclusively reserved for student musicians who excel in their discipline. It is used to qualify results rather than to analyse and act upon successful study behaviour. Students who show to be exceptionally gifted receive additional coaching, are given opportunities to perform in public, or can continue their studies in a master programme. Descriptions on the websites are brief and mainly list criteria students must meet in order to be selected. Though the texts suggest that successful competitors for the two honours ensembles must also have good collaborative skills and an entrepreneurial attitude, no specific characteristics of either the student or the programme didactics are mentioned explicitly on any of the websites. An exception to this rule is the Prince Claus Conservatory in the Netherlands – see table 2. This institute provides

motivated students with an interdisciplinary trajectory that challenges the young musicians to situate their practice with a broader societal context.

With regard to art and design education, universities in the Netherlands emphasize a student's motivation over grade point averages or other formal requirements. The didactics of the programmes focuses, by extent, on building a community of students with similar levels of intrinsic motivation and task dedication as well as deepening academic competence – see table 4. American universities, on the other hand, say little to nothing about the characteristics of the students they seek to educate. Instead the content of their curriculum is placed in the limelight. The orientation of these academic programmes is split between universities that offer their students an accelerated or advanced theory course versus those who provide unique opportunities for further professional training, such as field trips or a residency programme – see table 3. Another key difference is the fact that in the United States honors programs are fully embedded within the regular curriculum, whereas most Dutch students still partake in it as an extra-curricular activity. What the descriptions of honours programmes in both countries have in common, though, is that these texts neither elaborate on the institute's core values and objectives – as is common for university colleges, the archetypical honours programmes – nor expand upon the impact of the programme on the careers of graduates. To note, 3 out of 5 Dutch academies mention, in a few words, that honours students can continue their studies at master level, versus 2 out of 8 American institutes. However, no proof of effect is provided.

Notably, only few universities give a definition of cleverness – the integration of analytical ability, creativity, and practical intelligence (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 48), a student's need for self-management, and what Wolfensberger coined the didactics of “bounded freedom” (ibid, p. 117-118). OTIS College of Art and Design explicitly addresses “cleverness” in their academic core, which exists of a studio ‘foundation’, a ‘liberal arts and sciences’ theory programme, and ‘creative action’. All aspects are mirrored and enhanced in the objectives of their honors program. The so-called Practices at the Willem de Kooning Academy have a similar potential, which is not yet utilised in their honours programme. Bounded freedom, in turn, is most recognisably provided through having students write their own learning plan. It is however not possible to assess the full extent of this characteristic as none of the universities' descriptions elaborate in detail on their didactics.

Zooming in on the Netherlands, all academies state that their honours course is interdisciplinary. The scope thereof notably differs from offering an interdepartmental programme to collaborating with students from disciplines outside the humanities. Here too the academic content of the programme seems to be split, in this case, between providing an advanced theory course and working on so-called wicked problems in a societal context. Though honours programmes in The Netherlands are often seen as laboratories for educational innovation (Weerheijm, Veenstra & Ter Woord, 2015, p. 2), only Gerrit Rietveld Academy names it as one of the defining characteristics albeit in relation to their content rather than didactics. All programmes are a collaborative endeavour with a so-called centre of expertise, which are research groups at Dutch universities of applied sciences.

4. Preliminary Observations

As stated above, this research had the aim to create a first inventory of honours programmes at universities for the arts, rather than to elaborate upon, scrutinize, or explain its findings. There is nevertheless a preliminary observation that can be made from the data gathered. Although the initial premise of this study suggested that there would be an intrinsic difference between honours education at universities for the arts and institutes that do not preselect their students on the basis of a specific talent, there is no information found that would support such a presupposition. The descriptors that art academies and institutes for performing arts use to promote their honours programmes do not present anything that is out of the ordinary with the general theory on the subject – regardless of reservations on the level of implementation of various elements. There is a notable distinction between institutes that interpret excellence as successful study behaviour and those that see excellence as something that can be measured through grades and discipline-specific achievements. Hence, insofar as “excellence” and “talent development” are an on-going conversation within educational practice that is focused on a student’s behaviour, universities for the arts seem to abide by the same paradigm as other educational institutes.

5. Concluding Remarks for Further Research

The initial research question driving this study still stands: How is it possible to design honours education for specifically-talented students? This benchmark has been a first attempt to fill what seems to be a void in the existing literature on excellence. This note is therefore an invitation to others to share their knowledge on honours education in the context of art, design, music, dance, and theatre. One way forward is to look into the successes of our honours programmes; what are the effects of honours education on our students’ learning outcomes and their professional careers? In other words, to what extent is “excellence” in arts education making a difference?

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Table 1: List of Universities

Colour Coding Explained	
	The university states an honours programme on their website.
	The university does <u>not</u> state an honours programme on their website, but does provide a trajectory similar or partial to such a programme.
	The university facilitates students from non-art disciplines to enrich their studying by partaking in art classes.

UNIVERSITIES OF THE ARTS, The Netherlands	
AKV St. Joost, Breda and Den Bosch _Fine Art, and Design	
Amsterdam University of the Arts, Amsterdam _Music, Dance, and Theatre	
ArtEZ University of the Arts, Arnhem, Enschede, and Zwolle _Fine Art, Design, Music, Dance, and Theatre	
Codarts, Rotterdam _Music, Dance, and Theatre	
Conservatorium Haarlem, Inholland University of Applied Sciences, Haarlem _Music	
Design Academy, Eindhoven _Design	
Fontys Academy for Art, Tilburg _Fine Art, Design, Music, Dance, and Theatre	
Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam _Fine Art, and Design	
Academy Minerva and Prins Claus Conservatory, Hanze University, Groningen _Fine Art, Design, Music, and Dance	
HKU University of the Arts, Utrecht _Fine Art, Design, Music, and Theatre	
Royal Academy of Art, The Hague _Fine Art, and Design	
Royal Conservatoire, The Hague _Music, and Dance	
Willem de Kooning Academy, University of Applied Sciences, Rotterdam _Fine Art, and Design	
Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, Maastricht _Fine Art, Design, Music, Dance, and Theatre	

ART UNIVERSITIES, United States of America (partner institutes of the WdKA)	
Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore _Fine Art and Design	
Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston _Design, incl. Liberal Arts	

OTIS College of Art and Design, Los Angeles _Fine Art, and Design, incl. Liberal Arts and Sciences	
Ringling College of Art and Design, Sarasota _Fine Art, and Design, incl. Liberal Arts	
24. School of Visual Arts, New York _Fine Art, and Design	
The Art Institute of Boston, Lesley University, Boston _Fine Art, Design, and Liberal Arts and Sciences	

ART UNIVERSITIES, United States of America (QS World University Ranking 2019)	
03. Parsons School of Design at The New School, New York City _Fine Art, and Design, incl. Liberal Arts	
04. RISD Rhode Island School of Design, Providence _Fine Art, and Design, incl. Liberal Arts	
05. MIT Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge _Music, and Theatre	
09. SAIC School of the Art Institute of Chicago _Fine Art, Design, and Liberal Arts	
10. Pratt Institute, New York City _Fine Art, Design, and Liberal Arts and Sciences	
13. Art Center College of Design, Pasadena _Fine Art, and Design	
14. Stanford University _Fine Art, Music, Dance, and Theatre	
17. Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh _Fine Art, Design, Music, and Theatre	
21. California Institute of the Arts, Santa Clarita _Fine Art, Design, Music, Dance, and Theatre	
22. California College of the Arts, San Francisco and Oakland _Fine Art, and Design	

CONSERVATORIES, United State of America (niche.com)	
01. The Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia	
02. Berklee College of Music, Boston	
03. The Juilliard School, New York	
04. The New England Conservatory of Music _Honors Ensemble	
05. University of Southern California, Los Angeles	
06. Blair School of Music, Vanderbilt University, Nashville	
07. San Francisco Conservatory of Music, San Francisco	

08. Bienen School of Music, Northwestern University, Evanston _Vocal Honors Program	
09. The Shepherd School of Music, Rice University, Houston _5 Year Honors Program	
10. Peabody Institute, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore _Honors Ensemble	

DANCE ACADEMIES, United States of America (onstageblog.com)	
01. NYU Tisch School of the Arts, New York	
02. The Ailey School, Fordham University, New York	
03. Ann Lacy School of Dance and Entertainment, Oklahoma City University _Honors Program (general)	
04. The Juilliard School, New York	
05. Point Park University, Pittsburg _Honors Program (general)	
06. Jordan College of the Arts, Butler University, Indianapolis _Honors Program (general)	
07. Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, Dallas	
08. University of North Carolina School of the Arts, Winston Salem	
09. University of Arizona School of Dance, Tucson _Honors College (general)	
10. The Sharon Disney Lund School of Dance, California Institute of the Arts	

THEATRE SCHOOLS, United States of America (onstageblog.com)	
01. The Juilliard School, New York	
02. USC School of Dramatic Arts, Los Angeles	
03. The Theatre School, DePaul University, Chicago _Honors Program (general)	
04. NYU Tisch School of the Arts, New York _The Honors Program in Theatre Studies	
05. The University of Miami, Coral Gables _The Honors Program (general)	
06. Actors Studio Drama School, Pace University, New York	
07. Syracuse University, New York _Renée Crown University Honors Program (general)	
08. Boston University	

09. The University of Creative Careers, Savannah	
10. Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh	

Table 2: Profile of Honours Programmes at Dutch Universities for the Arts

		Academy Minerva	Prins Claus Conservatory	Gerrit Rietveld Academy	ArtEZ	Willem de Kooning Academy
Structure and logistics	extra-curricular					
	integrated					
	embedded					
Content and form	inter- and/or multidisciplinary					
	theory					
	research					
	societal issues					
	innovation					
Partners	research centre					
	universities					
	societal partners					
Selection	motivation					
	learning plan					
	(artistic) vision					
	competencie: creative ability					
	leadership					
	referent					
	grade average					
Future perspective	master					

Colour Coding Explained	
	The university explicitly states the characteristic in some detail on their website.
	The university mentions the characteristic, but either does not elaborate on it or arguable does not utilise it to its full scope as described in the literature.

Table 3: Profile of Honours Programmes at American Universities for the Arts

		OTIS College of Art and Design	School of Visual Arts	The Art Institute of Boston	Rhode Island School of Design	Stanford University	California College of the Arts	Parsons School of Design	School of the Arts Institute of Chicago
Structure and logistics	extra-curricular								
	embedded								
	acceleration								
Content and form	interdisciplinary								
	theory								
	research								
	critical thinking								
	community building								
	practise								
	profession								
Partners	interdepartmental								
Selection	motivation								
	portfolio								
	written proposal								
	essay								
	creativity								
	leadership								
	grade average								
Future perspective	master								

Colour Coding Explained

	The university explicitly states the characteristic in some detail on their website.
	The university mentions the characteristic, but either does not elaborate on it or arguably does not utilise it to its full scope as described in the literature.

Table 4: Positioning of Universities of the Arts in relation to the Literature on Excellence

	Students			Didactics		
	intrinsic motivation	need for self-management	cleverness	building community	providing “bounded freedom”	deepening academic competence
Academy Minerva (Hanze)	■	■		■		■
Prins Claus Conservatory (Hanze)	■				■	
Gerrit Rietveld Academy	■			■		■
ArtEZ	■					■
Willem de Kooning Academy	■	■	■	■		
OTIS College of Art and Design	■		■			■
School of Visual Arts						■
The Art Institute of Boston				■	■	
Rhode Island School of Design						■
Stanford University: Honors in the Arts						■
Stanford University: Honors in Art Practice				■	■	
California College of the Arts	■	■		■	■	
Parsons School of Design						
School of the Art Institute of Chicago						■

Colour Coding Explained	
■	The university explicitly states the characteristic in some detail on their website.
■	The university mentions the characteristic, but either does not elaborate on it or arguable does not utilise it to its full scope as described in the literature.

¹ At the time of research and writing, Mariska Versantvoort was the coordinator of the Honours Programme at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam (The Netherlands). Currently, she is working as a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick (United Kingdom).

² Insofar as universities in the Netherlands abide by British spelling in their website descriptions, I use “honours programme” to refer to Dutch curricula and “honors program” when speaking of their US equivalents.