What makes honours programmes attractive in the eyes of teaching and nursing students? A qualitative study

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Abstract

Since honors programs are a novelty in the Danish educational system, knowledge is needed on what makes the honors attractive to the students. The aim of this study was to provide insight into the motivation of second year students applying for nursing and teaching honors programs. The approach draws upon the work of Vincent Tinto and Albert Bandura. A content analysis based of student applications to the programs showed that both groups find the content of the programs attractive. In their applications teaching students stressed having extraordinary skills within the cognitive domain, while nursing students emphasised having skills within the affective domain. Both groups had the expectation that an honors program would facilitate their pursuit of personal and professional goals. Becoming a part of a community of likeminded peers was an attraction. Joining honors program represents a strategy to persist and complete one's degree, which means the programs may help to retain the group of extraordinary, ambitious students.

Keywords: honors programs; nursing; primary school teacher education; motives; goal orientations

1. Introduction

Background
The teacher education and nursing programs at University College Copenhagen (KP) in Copenhagen, Denmark offer honors programs. Although honors programs are generally transdisciplinary and designed to produce high-performing researchers or leaders, KP's programs educate highly skilled teachers and nurses in mono-disciplinary honors programs. Due to the growth in student dropout rates and a shortage of nurses and primary school teachers in Denmark, the honors programs are designed to attract and retain students with the help of an enriched curricula on didactics of science and highly specialised elderly care.

The programs are designed to target highly motivated teaching and nursing students with the ability to earn their degrees in programs with an enriched curriculum, experimental learning activities and extended practicum. The programs are expected to strengthen the teaching and nursing professions by producing extraordinarily qualified and skilled professionals. Honors colleges give higher education institutions a competitive edge, boosting their reputation in academia and society and enhancing their ability to recruit attractive staff and students (Betzer, 2023). Thus, the establishment of Copenhagen Honors College serves to strengthen the teaching and nursing professions and addresses the growth in dropout rates and shortage of nurses and primary school teachers.

The honors programs in question embrace key concepts within honors pedagogy that are internationally recognised. Both honors programs are composed to support the learning community, to enhance academic skills based on an enriched curricula and to give students greater freedom and responsibility in terms of the courses they take (Wolfensberger, 2012). Apart from the enriched curriculum, the honors programs in Nursing and Teaching at University College Copenhagen differ from ordinary bachelor's programs since they feature mentorships, expanded student services and additional resources, e.g. summer school, field trips and specially qualified teaching staff, in addition to privileged access to training facilities. There are also more teaching hours and lectures, not to mention a monthly honors stipend. There are no exams but most program activities and classes are mandatory. Honors students are expected to study harder, engage in extracurricular activities and to spend more time in class, their labs and in their practicum. Honors students are dismissed from the honors program if they do not meet the requirements or fail exams in regular classes. An ordinary bachelor's degree in Teacher Education and Nursing comprises 240/210 points in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), while students in the honors programs, which are offered from the fourth to seventh and eighth semesters, earn an additional 30 ECTS. To be accepted to an honors program, students must pass all exams in the ordinary curriculum, submit a written application, and do an interview, but there is no required minimum grade point average. Applicants must demonstrate a high level of motivation and the will and ability to follow the curriculum and participate in required extracurricular activities.

Honors in higher education was made possible in Denmark in 2015 **(**Ministry of higher education and Science; 2015). Since honors programs are a novelty in the Danish educational system and

since the main objective of the Copenhagen Honors College is to train students to work in teaching and nursing, knowledge is needed on what makes the honors programs attractive to students.

Consequently, our aim is to explore the extent to which societal and institutional recruitment and retainment goals are reflected in students' motivation for applying to honors programs and what can be learned from this. Guided by motivational theories we conducted a content analysis of written applications to gain insight into the underlying motivation of second year students applying to a nursing and primary school teacher education honors program by addressing the following research question: *What motivates teaching students and nursing students to apply for admission to an honors program, and what similarities and differences are there between the two groups of students*?

2. Method

In accordance with Tinto (2017) and Bandura (1994), we conducted a qualitative study using a document study comprising written student applications for the teaching and nursing education honors programs.

2.1 Data collection
The data for our analysis was collected until saturation was reached. In all 30 written applications, 15 of which were submitted by teaching students and 15 by nursing students were included. The 15 nursing students participating in this study were all women 23 to 57 years of age, while the 15 teaching students comprised 10 women and five men 21 to 34 years of age. The sample was randomly selected from among the 117 applications (57 teaching students and 60 nursing students) the honors programs received in 2017-2022. The applications comprised the students' explanation about why they wished to enrol in Copenhagen Honors College, their CVs (including relevant experience), and letters of recommendation from, e.g. teachers, employers and clinical teaching settings.

2.2 Ethical considerations
The study was conducted in accordance with ethical requirements in terms of anonymity, informed consent and data security.

2.3 Analytical framework
The analysis is a theoretical guided content analysis of written applications of 30 teacher and nursing students. A deductive content analysis is used to analyze the data (Polit & Beck, 2014). The analytical framework is theories on motivation and institutional integration and draws upon the works of Vincent Tinto and Albert Bandura. Tinto asserts that a variety of circumstances must exist in terms of student motivation persisting in earning a degree, stating: "experiences on motivation can be understood as the outcome of the interaction among student goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived worth or relevance of the curriculum" (Tinto; 2017). Bandura (1977; 1994) describes motivation as people's experiences and perceptions of their capabilities to perform and attain goals, i.e. perceptions that would compel people to enrol in a challenging educational program, which Pless and Katznelson (2019) also corroborate.

2.4 Data analysis

A category matrix has been developed in dialogue with theory and data (Table 1). The theories of Tinto (2017) and Bandura (1994) on motivation and goal orientations allowed us to code the data according to the following categories: personal goals for education and career; self-efficacy; sense of belonging; perception of curriculum; other motivation and goal orientations. Description of categories are described in table 1. Finally, the categories are summarized addressing the research question: *What motivates teaching students and nursing students to apply for admission to an honors program, and what similarities and differences are there between the two groups of students?* The authors discussed each analytical step reaching consent and verifying consistency of the identified meaning units. The categories are presented in the results section, and illustrated here with quotes that are typical and cover the content of the category (Silverman, 2013; Polit & Beck, 2014; Graneheim, 2017; Denzin, 2018)**.**

Table 1. Overview of category matrix

Student characteristics	Personal goals for education and career	Self-efficacy: perception of own abilities and opportunities to meet educational requirements	Sense of belonging: perception of attachment to the educational institution, individuals and groups	Perception of curriculum: perception of the relevance and quality of the academic content	Other motivation and goal orientations

The next section presents the categories in more detail and illustrates them with typical quotes from the student applications (Silverman, 2013; Polit & Beck, 2014; Graneheim, 2017; Denzin, 2018)**.**

3. Results

What motivates teaching students and nursing students to apply for admission to an honors program, and what similarities and differences are there between the two groups of students?
In the 30 applications in our study, we identified 87 drivers, 71 of which were assigned to the first four categories in the matrix (table 1) derived from the work of Tinto and Bandura, while the other 16 fall under other motivations and goal orientations. Table 2 provides an overview of the various motivations that emerged in the 30 applications of teacher and nurse students.

Table 2. Number of students in each category of drivers

	Personal goals for education and career	Self-efficacy: perception of own abilities and opportunities to meet educational requirements	Sense of belonging: perception of attachment to the educational institution, individuals and groups	Perception of curriculum: perception of the relevance and quality of the academic content	Other motivations and goal orientations
Nursing students (n=15)	10	12	4	11	8
Teacher students (n=15)	8	11	5	10	8
Total	18	23	9	21	16

Notably, the categories largely appear equally frequently in both teaching and nursing applications, though differences do emerge concerning content, i.e. what is written.

3.1 Personal goals for education and career
This category covers meaning units in the applications related to the perceived life history of the applicants. Personal goals for enrolling in and completing a program may not be clear and may change during the degree program. Some of the reasons for doing the honors program are its intrinsic benefits, such as personal development, learning, autonomy or fulfilling of goals connected to personal narratives or the student's (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Other reasons may relate to perceived extrinsic benefits or expected rewards, such as getting a job, better opportunities for being promoted, and achieving a higher income or status (Tinto, 2017). The drivers of many nursing students fall into this category. Some students are highly interested in older people, one stating: *"My goal and my dream has always been to work with older people"* (N2), while others have a general interest in the nursing profession and a desire to acquire more skills and knowledge, as well as to improve their skills: *"I am passionate about the nursing profession"* (N6). This category also includes teaching students, who describe their motivation: *"Finally, I want the opportunity to test and develop my skills in practice"* (T6), another student stating: *"I realised that I wanted to be a science teacher when I was in my second year of upper secondary school, and ever since then my goal has been to become the absolutely best teacher I can be"* (T9)*.*

Many (see table 2) applicants share this category and describe their personal goals for education and career as drivers for applying to the honors program. A shared aspect, in terms of content is that the students state personal goals connected to their upbringing, family relationships or people they met in primary school. They introduce their life story, e.g. *"I have always wanted to be …"* to support their application.

A notable difference is that the drivers of the teaching students are directed inward in that they express personal goals to improve their skills to become the best in their field: *"I want to be the very best teacher"* (T10). The drivers the nursing students present, in contrast, are primarily directed outward in that they want to improve their skills to help others or to be useful to others: *"Thus, my passion for working with older people has become the driving force for applying for admission to CHC [Copenhagen Honors College]"* (N9)*.*

3.2 Self-efficacy
This category covers meaning units describing how applicants perceive their ability to engage in and perform in education. Self-efficacy defined as a belief in one's ability to succeed in a specific situation or with a specific task, reflects how individuals experience themselves in interaction with others and how they perceive their capacity to have some control over their day-to-day lives, i.e. their locus of control. Since self-efficacy is not generalisable, it cannot be applied to all tasks and situations. A sense of self-efficacy, however, reflects how individuals address challenges, goals and tasks, those with a high sense of self-efficacy tending to engage more readily in tasks, invest a greater effort into overcoming difficulties, complete tasks and attain goals pertaining to, e.g. academic and professional achievements (Caprara et al., 2008).

A majority of the nursing students describe drivers that belong in this category: *"If I am accepted to Copenhagen Honors College, the school will gain a reliable and committed student with perseverance who is forever curious and possesses a thirst for new knowledge. I am constantly working to develop myself both on a human and professional level"* (N14), just as most teaching students also describe drivers belonging to this category: *"I already have solid prerequisites for developing an authentic and motivating teaching practice"* (T1)*.*

A key similarity in the self-efficacy category is that most (see table 2) students in both programs describe drivers that fit in this category. The differences emerge in terms of content and are quite significant. Following the Bloom`s taxonomy of learning the applicants present themselves as high performers within the cognitive and the affective domain. The cognitive domain covers mental and intellectual skills, and the affective domain relates to interest, attitude, and values. (Bloom et al., 1956).

The applications of the teacher students tend to stress personal characteristics that fall within the cognitive domain such as knowledge-seeking and academic skills. One example of statement supporting this assertion is: *"I am a very ambitious student who always seeks new perspectives and knowledge beyond what the study already entails"* (T9). In the nursing applications, in contrast, the perception of high self-efficacy concerns the affective domain, which includes a high assessment of one's capacity to connect, interact and communicate with others: *"I am good at creating good relationships"* (N2) and *"I am good at listening, I am extrovert and I easily connect and interact with others"* (N5)*.*

3.3 Sense of belonging

This category covers meaning units describing how applicants perceive interacting with fellow students and engaging in social life at college. The perception of oneself as a member of a community that shares similar values, academic aspirations and interest is a strong indicator for student persistence. Hence a sense of belonging, i.e. experiencing oneself as being recognised as a member of a community, is a driver for engaging with other students in achieving academically. Tinto (2017) asserts that: "*The result is a bond, often expressed as a commitment, which serves to bind the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise. It can refer to specific smaller communities within the institution as, for instance, with students with whom one shares a common interest or more broadly to the institution generally*" (Tinto; 2017, p. 258). Only a few nursing students describe drivers that fit in this category, stating for example: "*And I would love to work together and solve these problems with some fellow students who have the same motivation and put in the same professional effort as me*" (N5) and "*I am applying for admission to the program because I want to be part of a professional community with other students who also want to make an extra effort in terms of their studies*" (N9).

Some of teaching students also describe drivers that belong in this category, for example: "*There's a lack of mutual feedback, challenges and commitment. Time and time again I meet fellow students with the attitude that studying and related projects are 'just something to get over with', but what is the point of earning a degree if you don't take advantage of the opportunity to progress and enjoy the process?*" (T7).
The similarities in this category are that few (see table 2) students in both programs describe drivers attributed to the category of Sense of belonging. There are also similarities in terms of content, with the students expressing a desire to join professional communities with other like-minded individuals. In this category, the two groups of students do not differ.

For some applicants, getting accepted to the honors program represents a strategy for becoming part of a new community of peers who presumably have identical or similar approaches, e.g. they want to study harder, and are ambitious about studying. Filling out an application represents the first step in becoming a member of that community of peers, who applicants assume are also driven by the same professional values and aspirations. In this sense applying for the program is an act of detachment from the ordinary educational trajectory and community that allows students to join a community with share values and study behaviour.

3.4 Perception of curriculum

This category covers meaning units describing the applicants' perception of how the curriculum and content of the program will contribute to their personal goals. Student perception of the relevance and value of the academic content is derived from their perception of the quality of the curriculum and to what extent they find the content and learning activities useful and responsive to their interests (Tinto, 2017).

The way many nursing students describe their motivation fits in this category: "*I am applying for admission to CHC–S [Copenhagen Honors College–Nursing], as I have a particularly strong interest in elderly care and diabetes. This interest stems from my bachelor's degree in public health science, where I wrote my bachelor's project about the Steno Diabetes Centers*" (N10). Another applicant

stating: *"I see the CHC–S program as an excellent opportunity to learn more about elderly care"* (N11).

Also the manner in which many teaching students describe their motivation fits in this category: *"I fancy the combination of subjects in the curriculum. It offers an opportunity to expose students to the natural sciences and to be able to show them the connections in the world"* (T12).

There are no differences between the two groups, the drivers occurring most frequently in both.

Many (see table 2) students state that the relevance of the curriculum is a major driver for applying to the honors program. The majority of teaching students show professional interests that align with the curriculum, e.g. in climate change, and wish to strengthen and develop their chosen subjects: *"I would like to develop methods and materials for primary schools"* (T7), while others in this group state that they want to make the subject exciting, inspiring and challenging for pupils. Nursing student applications contain similar statements indicating that the subjects taught in the program align with their personal interest in elderly care.

3.5 Other motivations and goal orientations
This category covers meaning units related to drivers and reasoning that fall between categories or meaning units that the theoretical framework outlined above do not encompass, for example, statements from nursing students describing their motivation: *"I see great value in helping others"* (N1) and *"I know that I have a strong wish to make a difference and help people"* (N6). Teaching students also describe issues that belong in this category: *"I want to make a difference"* (T2). The two groups do not differ in this category, and they make similar statements expressing the desire to help others and make a difference.

4. Discussion

4.1 Discussion of results
Most applicants expect that being admitted to the honors program will allow them to make a positive difference for others, their future colleagues, clients and workplaces. The desire to serve others and make a difference as future professionals, a pervasive theme in the applications, is in accordance with research on professions, which shows that altruism and doing good to society are traditional professional values (Freidson, 2003). The Danish Evaluation Institute (2021) shows that 69% of female students and 54% of male students in higher education prefer educational pathways that will lead to jobs that positively impact others which also supports our findings.

The desire to join a community of likeminded students is a theme that appears frequently in the applications, with the two groups of students showing no difference in this regard, in accordance with Scager et al. (2012), who show that the factors that most heavily distinguish between honors and non-honors students are the desire to learn, the drive to excel and creativity, though little difference exists between the two in terms of intelligence and persistence. Applying to an honors program represents a way of controlling one's study environment since it involves actively seeking out peers and embracing a strategic approach that involves studying with people who want more than what the community in ordinary programs offer. A sense of belonging is experienced when people recognise themselves as a member of a community and serves as a driver for engaging

with other students in achieving academically (Tinto, 2017). A sense of belonging is also one of the three pillars of honours education programs (Van Beveren et al., 2022).

Comparing how the students present themselves as high achievers within the domains of learning indicates that differences exist in how teaching and nursing students perceive themselves as learners. The differences in self-presentation between the two groups appear systematically across all of the categories in our framework. The teaching students tend to present themselves as high performers with strong potential within the cognitive domain, while nursing students are inclined to present themselves as high performers with extraordinary potential within the affective domain. Overall, the applications show that the students emphasise different domains when presenting themselves to the admissions committee. The differences, which may reflect that teaching and nursing represent different educational and professional traditions, may appear paradoxical, since both teaching and nursing require strong skills within the cognitive and affective domains (Houtsonen & Warvik, 2010; Moos et al., 2007).

4.2 Discussion of method
In social research, studying the content of documents is a recognised empirical approach, with information collected from letters, diaries and applications representing "naturally occurring data" since it is not produced for research reasons (Silverman, 2013). Students applying for admission to the honors programs produced the documents included in this study, which means they are rich in information, the texts reflecting how the students frame themselves as attractive and qualified candidates. One should bear in mind that the present study is based on self-reported data, where the students consciously frame themselves as candidates for the two programs. Thus, the data capture what student perceptions are of what might make them appear as attractive candidates in the selection process. The applications can be said to represent student attempts at image control, which is a strategic way to act that involves staging oneself in the world to attain conscious and unconscious goals (Goffman, 1990).

4.3 Limitations
Relying solely on documents produced for other purposes is a limitation of this study since they are passive sources of information and the ability to assess their validity is limited (Silverman, 2013). To address this challenge, we included 30 documents that the authors carefully read independently and discussed until agreement was reached. Theory primarily guided the content analysis, which relied on categories derived from the applications and that were validated during a horizontal approach to identifying patterns in their content.

5. Conclusion

What motivates teaching and nursing students to apply for admission to an honors program? The overall pattern suggests that the motivation and goal orientations of applicants for the two programs do not differ. Teaching and nursing students underscore that they find the content of the honors programs attractive, both groups highlighting their intrinsic motivation for applying: as future teachers and nurses they want to make a difference and help people. They expect the honors program to facilitate their learning and pursuit of personal and professional goals. They believe that being accepted to the program and engaging with the curriculum will lead to a greater sense of satisfaction since they will become more highly skilled. The applicants, who express a

strong desire to join the community of honors students, expect that being in the program will help them become members of a community of likeminded peers. This may represent what is most attractive about the honors programs. Joining the programs may thus be seen as a strategy to persist and complete their degrees, which is why the programs may help to retain extraordinary, ambitious students.

What are the differences between the two groups of students? The analysis reveals systematic differences on how teaching and nursing students present themselves as learners. The former present themselves as high performers within the cognitive domain, while the latter portray themselves as high performers within the affective domain. Explaining these differences is beyond the scope of this study.

According to the motivation and goals presented, the applicants expect to engage in future careers as nurses and teachers, which indicates that, for the time being, the applicants adhere to the main objective of the programs: to produced qualified future members of the teaching and nursing professions. Longitudinal studies on the careers of teachers and nurses graduating with honors are required to provide empirical data to support this conclusion, just as the long-term effects on the career patterns of nurses and teacher who graduated from an honors programs must be explored.

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