

1. What value does the honours programme offer to students?
2. What value does the honours programme provide to teachers involved in the programme?
3. What impact do the experiences from the honours programme have on the curricula of the regular bachelor's programmes?

Reading Guide

The theoretical framework is presented first, examining the honours programme in the context of the available literature. Next, the research design is outlined, including the qualitative research approach employed. The results are then presented, based on interviews and journaling data. Finally, the conclusion provides answers to the sub-questions, discusses key findings, and offers recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the theoretical framework, we primarily focus on honours programmes offered within universities of applied sciences. Although honours programmes in higher education are relatively new, their prevalence has been increasing rapidly (Kool et al., 2017). These programmes provide students with opportunities to engage with broadening and deepening (societal) themes driven by intrinsic motivation. Typically, honours programmes are conducted in small groups, which fosters alternative learning approaches, creativity, self-direction, critical reflection, and authentic assessment (Byrne, 1998; Tiesinga, 2013). Wolfensberger (2012) identifies three key dimensions within honours programmes: (1) the creation of a community, (2) the enhancement of academic performance, and (3) the freedom to learn. These dimensions are interrelated and mutually influence each other, resulting in emergence: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Smit & Van Os, 2022). The following section will elaborate on these dimensions and how they are integrated within the Viaa honours programme.

(1) Creation of a Community

The honours programme is organized around small groups, with the meetings playing a central role in cultivating a sense of community. The design of the programme, which facilitates ample interaction among participants, is a crucial element in this process (Wolfensberger, 2012). Additionally, aspects such as commitment and shared responsibility for the programme's content are fundamental. This shared responsibility is inherently tied to the small-group format, as expressed by Draper et al. (1999, as cited in Wolfensberger, 2012): "No one can hide: each person is active and engaged" (p. 39). At Viaa, the group size was limited to a maximum of 10 participants, including the two instructors. A key feature of the honours programme was the shared meals, which played a significant role in strengthening the sense of community.

(2) Enhancing Academic Performance

Sharan, Klein, and Cruming (2020) identify two key components essential for a vital learning process: community—outlined in the previous section—and interdisciplinary collaboration. These elements are similarly integrated within the Viaa honours programme. Through collaborative learning, students exchange existing knowledge with newly acquired insights. This exchange occurs in interactions with peers and guest speakers, as well as in group

discussions. At Viaa, this approach is further facilitated by the organization of masterclasses. Consequently, the emphasis is not on improving academic performance per se, but rather on cultivating a dynamic and engaging learning process. The honours programme primarily targets students who exhibit investigative curiosity, rather than solely focusing on academically high-performing individuals. A longitudinal study indicates that students enrolled in the honours programme develop a higher degree of investigative curiosity compared to a control group, which was more oriented toward achieving specific academic goals (Kool et al., 2017).

(3) Freedom to Learn

Students in the honours programme were granted the freedom to determine their own learning trajectories (Wolfensberger, 2012). This autonomy fostered an environment conducive to the development of individual skills, motivation, and creativity (Kool et al., 2017). These three factors are essential for the growth of emerging professionals (Gagné, 1995). When students were provided with this freedom, it contributed to an engaging and intellectually stimulating educational atmosphere (Weerheijm & Voncken, 2023). This was particularly significant for students in late adolescence, who required social, emotional, and cognitive challenges to facilitate their development (Jolles, 2016). According to Jolles (2016), it was not only the teacher but, crucially, the student who determined the level of challenge. At Viaa, the honours programme addressed this need by offering depth, fostering a sense of community, and allowing students to co-construct the content of their learning experiences. For example, one project involved examining mobile phone usage in a secondary school and exploring strategies to reduce it by offering students alternative activities. The freedom lay not only in what was learned and how it was learned, but also in authentic assessment. This created an educational environment that served as a practice ground between home and society (Biesta, 2015).

Transferability to Regular Education

Several studies suggest that the transferability of honours programmes to regular education is feasible. Research conducted by Hanze University of Applied Sciences indicates that universities of applied sciences identify significant added value for students, the programme, and the anticipated professional field (Wolfensberger, de Jong, & Drayer, 2012). Institutions of applied sciences posit that these programmes offer students the opportunity to distinguish themselves and attract more motivated participants. According to Wolfensberger, de Jong, and Drayer (2012), excellence-based education has the potential to positively impact conventional educational offerings. Students enrolled in the honours programme also engage in regular educational activities. The honours programme places a strong emphasis on collaboration and process-oriented learning. As such, insights acquired within the honours framework can inform group collaboration in standard educational settings.

Moreover, the programme can serve as a catalyst for introducing innovative ideas and improvements in education. Teachers can leverage the knowledge and experiences gained within the honours programme to enrich regular teaching practices (Wolfensberger, de Jong, & Drayer, 2012). Furthermore, offering an honours programme can serve to distinguish a university of applied sciences from its peers, potentially attracting more talented and motivated students. This, in turn, can provide a positive impetus for the broader higher education landscape (Wolfensberger, de Jong, & Drayer, 2012).

It is important to note, however, that universities of applied sciences generally have larger institutional structures compared to Viasa University of Applied Sciences, which might result in greater developmental capacity. The question arises as to whether these larger institutions perceive the same valuable components within their honours programmes and whether further opportunities for growth and enhancement exist within this domain.

3. Research Methodology and Design

3.1 Research Design

This study offers a critical analysis of four years of the honours programme at Viasa. The selected research method, journaling, encourages both students and mentors in articulating their engagement with the honours programme in a creative manner.

3.2 Research Context

This research was undertaken to assess the pilot phase of the honours programme at Viasa University, spanning from 2021 to 2024. During this period 21 students and 5 teachers participated in the programme. Students had the opportunity to engage in the programme during either, their second or fourth year of the bachelor's degree. Viasa University of Applied Sciences is an institution with approximately 2,100 students, offering bachelor's degree programmes in Primary Education, Social Work, Theology and Health Care.

Honours programmes are offered by various vocational higher education institutions and universities. While universities typically cater high-achieving students, institutions such as Viasa accommodate diverse learning styles, adopt a design-oriented approach, and place a significant emphasis on the personal learning processes of students. The honours programme at Viasa is consistent with their vision of teaching and learning, encapsulated in the concept of 'Meaningful Encountering'. Consequently, students are not required to demonstrate academically excellence to participate in the honours programme; however, they must exhibit motivation to engage with it. As part of the application procedure, students are required to submit a motivational letter, which is subsequently discussed with one of the programme's mentors.

The programme was organized into six to eight sessions, each lasting from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m., with a shared dinner. The group collectively determined the theme for each session, as well as the agenda for each meeting. Although this collaborative decision-making process was frequently experienced as uncomfortable by the students, it was deliberately incorporated as part of the programme design. This concept of 'dwelling in ignorance' was regarded as a foundational element in promoting deeper learning and enhancing motivation. Between the sessions, students collaborated on activities that aligned with the theme or addressed their individual learning questions. At the end of the programme, all students presented their personal learning themes and how they had worked on it. Subsequently, students received a certificate acknowledging 5 ECTS credits.

This study employs qualitative research methods. The approach to data collection aligns with the character of the honours programme, which fosters creativity among both students and teachers (Van der Vaart, 2021). Specifically, respondents were invited to use creative

methods to express themselves, such as poems and word clouds. The researchers utilized this qualitative data collection approach to capture the “natural process of engagement, based on common-sense decision making, intuition, and a general receptiveness to the natural flow of events and experiences” (Van der Vaart, 2021, p. 123). To document this ‘flow of events and experiences’, a ‘pass-along journal’ (in Dutch: doorgeefdagboek) was used as a medium. One mentor of the programme asked alumni students to collect the pass-along journal from the university, along with mentors who had been participated in the programme.

In addition to the pass-along journal, two group interviews were conducted. One one-hour group interview was held with five current students, from the honours programme. Two of the students were in their second year of the bachelor’s program, while the other three students were at their fourth year. They were asked about their experiences of the honours programme and which elements they would like to see integrated into their regular bachelor’s programme. The researcher also inquired about their experiences with collaborative learning and creating their own learning process, as well as the role of the mentors in this process. Another interview was conducted with the current honours mentors. The primary focus in this one-hour interview was on the valuable components of the honours programme. The researcher then asked the mentors to compare these components with the standard bachelor’s programme and to suggest how these elements could be integrated into those programmes.

In total, 12 (alumni) students and 3 (alumni) mentors participated in the study, representing more than 50% of the students and mentors who had been part of the honours programme. A total of 21 students and 5 mentors were involved in the honours programme.

3.3 Procedure

Initially, students and alumni within the honours programme were invited to contribute to a pass-along journal by sharing their experiences related to the honours programme. To document their experiences, participants had the option to choose from creative assignments (see Figure 1), such as writing a short poem or engaging in any self-conceived form of creative expression.

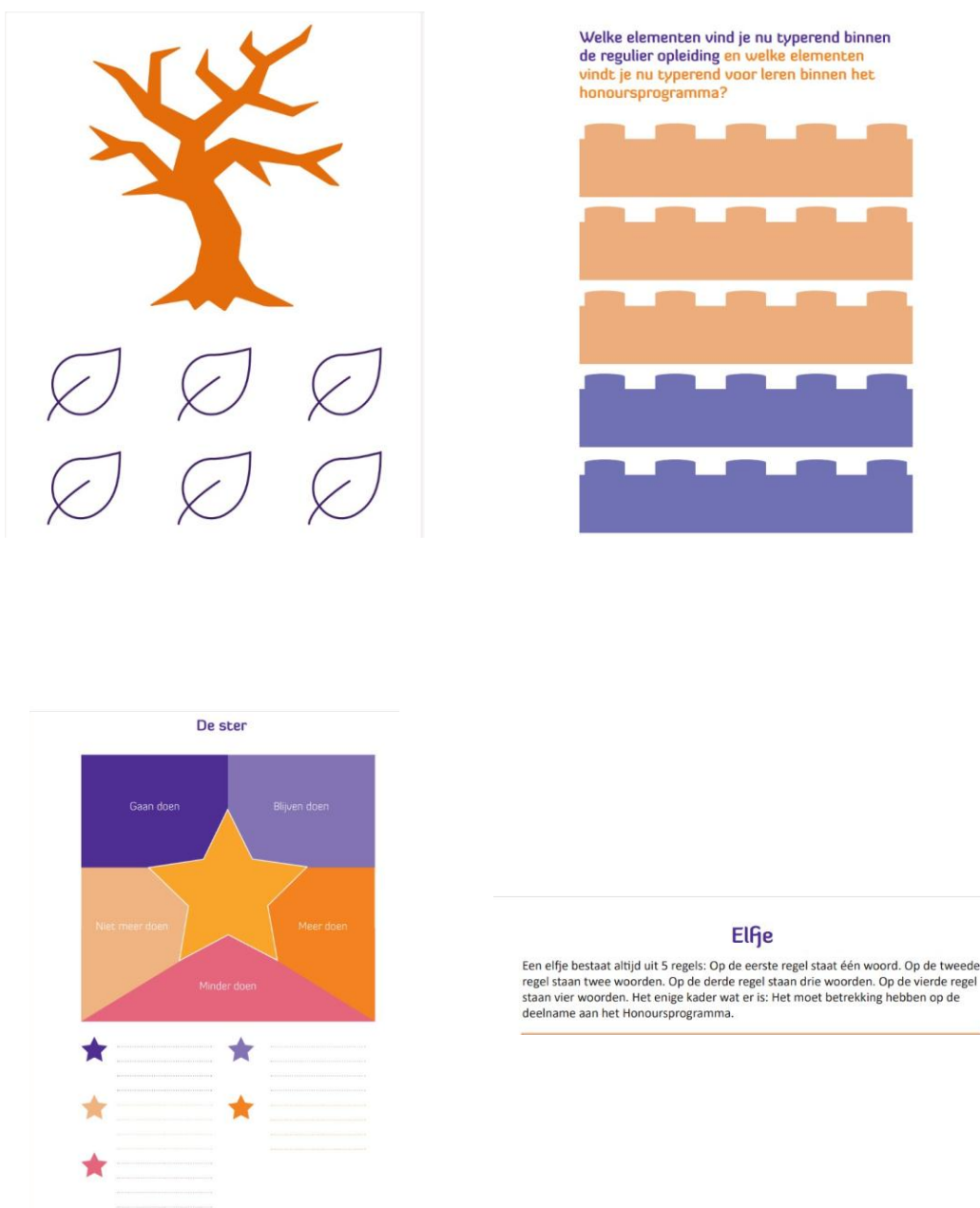


Figure 1: An overview of creative expressions for both students and mentor to express their thoughts about the honours programme.

The data from the interviews and the pass-along journal were coded using MAXQD; a software program for qualitative data analysis. It is particularly user-friendly for analysing images and similar data. All data were coded using open coding resulting in 146 codes. Subsequently, all codes were organized into subthemes and, in turn, into broader themes. During a working session, the researcher together with the mentors involved in the honours programme designed these broader themes based on the open codes: (1) community elements, (2) non-judgemental, (3) learning by doing, (4) transfer to regular education.

4. Results

4.1 What value does the honours programme have for students?

There were several valuable components for students within the honours programme. As we mentioned in the theoretical framework, building a community is an essential element for fostering flourishing learning. Being part of the group was perceived as enjoyable by students. Mentors were also part of the group, and no hierarchy was experienced; "They also join in the fun." (St.1) At the beginning of the programme students initially felt uncomfortable but over time they gradually became more comfortable sharing their thoughts. According to current honours students the value of being part of a group, of being together and learning together also strengthened them as professionals.

Sharing dinner was also part of the programme and played a role in building a community. However, at the beginning of the programme, sharing dinner could feel uncomfortable, as one student mentioned: *"But at first, I also found it a bit awkward. Kind of, because you'd think, oh, am I relaxed now or does everything count, so to speak. Yet, in hindsight, the meal turned out to be valuable."* (St.3). Alumni also mentioned the sharing meals as an important component that helped them 'flourish'.

Within the community of the honours programme students felt free to collaboratively explore societal themes across the disciplines. The diversity within the group (which means meeting students from other bachelor's programs) was highly appreciated. It provided the opportunity to gain insight into each other's perspectives. Students also mentioned that the coaching questions posed by their mentors were of great assistance.

Inherent to the emphasis on community building is a focus on collaboration. Both alumni and current students in the group interview highlighted collaboration and learning together as components of the honours program that contributed to their growth. Collaboration was a central theme throughout the process. One student mentioned: *"No, but now we really reached out to each other, no, but now it really happened. (...) How can we get the collaboration going again?"* (St.2). Another student mentioned: *"In collaboration, because normally it's like, I work together because a product needs to be finished. I don't care how, as long as it... But here I noticed that it really matters how you collaborate. Because you invest in it, and you're allowed to take time for it."* (St.3). It reflects a sense of shared responsibility, which they experienced to a greater extent than in regular bachelor's programs.

Learning had primarily occurred collaboratively and emerged through interaction. This made it difficult to define the program precisely, as it was not strictly structured. Students felt the freedom to develop and collaborate on project. They noted that there was room for both personal as professional development. That opportunity to learn by doing and through interaction allowed them to explore new ideas. This freedom was referred to as 'out-of-the-box-thinking' by the students.

The freedom to discuss societal themes, explore innovative research methods, engage in learning by doing, and focus on collaboration was likely more fruitful because of the feeling of not to being judged by an assessment. This idea was mentioned by several students, particularly in reference to the number of credits awarded for the honours programme.

Although participation in the programme accounted to 5 European Credits – and the corresponding time commitment– current students did not feel that an assessment was attached. This, in turn, gave them the freedom and motivation to take initiative. As one student stated: "*Precisely because we get credits for it, we really want to do something*" (St.4). It is worth noting that in previous years, students did not receive credits; only in the final year of the program did students earn credits for it. Nevertheless, both groups of students perceived external assessment as either non-existent or subordinate.

4.2 What value does the honours programme have for teachers within the programme?

Several valuable components emerged for mentors during the research. A few of these are the same as those for students, such as building a community, being part of a group process, and freely discussing societal themes. They also mentioned the importance of safety and being conscious that it takes time. Time and safety are closely related. Spending extended time together was perceived as highly valuable. Therefore, for learning it is important to pay attention to these two components. This could also be valuable for the regular bachelor's program, as we will describe in the next section.

As a result of being a small community, it was also observed that everyone participates. This was closely related to shared responsibility and collaboration. Both mentors in the honours programme stated that the focus is not primarily on assessment, but rather on being challenged to creatively demonstrate one's personal growth and development. Teachers noted that co-teaching in the programme is enriching, and this could also be a valuable component for regular teaching. However, this opportunity is often restricted by budgetary constraints.

4.3 What value does experiences of the honours programme have for the curricula of the regular bachelors?

Taking into account the components of safety and time, the mentors mentioned above suggested that this approach also be applied to regular education, including the design of schedules that allow teachers to spend extended periods with students, free from the time constraints of a standard 45-minute lesson and the 10-week term. In addition to these elements a few other components could be implemented in regular education.

- The honours programme is not as strictly defined, which creates space for students to contribute to the lessons. If regular bachelor's programmes were less strictly structured, students could be asked what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.
- The small groups fostered greater bonding. In larger groups students feel less connected, which may negatively affect their learning.
- Co- teaching is an enrichment for teachers and their teaching skills. It could be valuable to facilitate these forms of professional learning. The feeling students experienced of 'being judged' by rubrics is not always helpful. Although students initially seem to benefit from the use of these rubrics, upon evaluating in retrospect, they prefer a broader framework that encourages more creativity and ownership of their own learning process. Both teachers and students indicate that the design of the honours programme most closely corresponds to the design of the minor programmes offered by the university. The most important common factor is the extended time available for the programme.

5. Conclusion & Discussion

Based on data retrieved from twelve students and three mentors, we identified 146 codes and categorized them into four broader themes: (1) community elements, (2) non-judgemental, (3) learning by doing, (4) transfer to regular education. In this qualitative study, we examined the value of the honours programme for students, teachers, and standard curricula. This was achieved by addressing the following three sub-questions:

1. What value does the honours programme have for students?
2. What value does the honours programme have for teachers within the honours programme?
3. What value does the honours programme have for the university?

5.1 Conclusion

The results indicate that students perceive the honours programme as valuable. For students, the programme's value lies in its contribution to their personal and professional development, which is essential for the people-oriented professions for which Viaa University of Applied Sciences prepares its students. Students highlight the value of thinking and acting beyond established frameworks, within the safety of a group. This collective nature distinguishes the honours programme from the regular programmes which are more focused on the individual learning process.

Within the safety of the group, students experienced the freedom to learn by doing, stepping outside their comfort zone, without feeling judged. This approach opens a deeper dimension of learning, including higher levels of abstract thinking. These elements contribute to this deeper dimension of learning, which also encompasses abstract levels of learning (Jolles, 2016). The elements of collectiveness, time and process are interconnected, leading to emergence; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Smit & Van Os, 2022).

Teachers report that the coaching style of teaching is a highly effective method: as it enables them to remain attuned to the student's learning needs. Time is a crucial factor: teachers must provide students with the opportunity to take ownership of their learning process. Progressing together with the group is considered valuable. Teachers also report applying insights gained from the honours programme in the regular curriculum. Furthermore, teachers highlight that implementing the honours programme at a small university presents significant challenges. In contrast, larger universities have embedded the honours programme within in so-called innovation labs, linking it to other innovations and pilot projects, thereby enhancing the organization and effectiveness of such programmes.

This research demonstrates that participation in the honours programme enables teachers to gain insights into various forms of learning. Coaching questions and fostering community building contribute to this process. It is also valuable to guide the process over time by continuing to ask coaching questions and support community building. Furthermore, teachers report that participation provides insights into potential educational innovations within regular education, such as (1) providing more room for students' input during lessons, (2) allocating more time together through involvement in minors, (3) co-teaching, and (4) ensuring more bonding in small groups.

Participation in the honours programme offers opportunities for both teachers and students to distinguish themselves. Furthermore, the honours programme can be viewed as a testing ground for educational innovation.

5.2 Discussion

This research was conducted at a small university with a relatively limited sample of respondents. All respondents in the sample still have some connection to Viaa. Alumni who live in other cities or no longer maintain contact with Viaa were not included in the study. Although data saturation was achieved during the collection process, the results should be interpreted with some caution. An additional point of caution is that the use of creative formats by respondents may have unintentionally influenced their responses.

This research raises the question of whether regular education should also serve as a challenging educational context in which the dimensions of the honours programme – such as community building, academic performance enhancement, and the freedom to learn – can be incorporated. The distinction from regular education lies in the creation of a challenging educational environment and practical learning space, facilitated by the autonomy students have within the community to pursue what and how they wish to learn. In contrast, regular education tends to have more defined goals and structured pathways, as noted by both teachers and students. This could serve a topic for further investigation.

5.3 Recommendations

The added value of the honours programme can be summarized as follows: collaborative learning through experiential activities within a supportive community where students are guided to step outside their comfort zones and engage in learning without judgment. Although the honours programme is no longer offered at Viaa University of Applied Sciences, several recommendations can be made based on the findings of this research. A key question remains regarding what other educators across Viaa can learn from this programme and how they might apply its insights to sustain or enhance the quality from the programme to maintain or improve the quality of regular education. Subsequent research could focus on group learning dynamics and the autonomy granted to students in shaping their own learning within regular education.

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