

Note

When ambition meets opportunity: An example of unlocking talent through Honours in Dutch vocational education and training

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Received: September 16, 2025; Accepted: September 18, 2025; Published: October 6, 2025

Keywords: honours education; vocational education; talent development

Over the past decade, interest in honours programmes has increased in the Netherlands and has developed across the entire Dutch educational system—from primary education to university. These programmes are designed for ambitious students who wish to go beyond the standard curriculum (Ten Berge et al., 2018; Wolfensberger, 2015).

In 2015, Vocational Education and Training (VET), also known as senior secondary vocational education, was the last sector in Dutch education to be encouraged by the government to develop honours education. Honours education is particularly well-suited to this sector, as the Dutch educational system often evaluates students based on their deficiencies rather than their strengths (Van de Weerd, 2023), with schools focusing on closing the gap between students' abilities and predefined diploma requirements instead of fostering broader talent development. Access to VET has a lower entry level than higher education, primarily in terms of cognitive demands, which makes the development of honours education especially important and challenging for this sector. Such programmes allow VET students to showcase a wider range of talents related to the skills they are building for their future careers. From the perspective of honours alumni, recent research on the long-term impact of honours programmes clearly demonstrates their added value (Eshuis et al., 2024).

From a value-based perspective, education systems should meet the needs of all students who require support in developing their talents (Haug, 2017). Honours programmes do just that. To address this imperative, we present our reflections on the three overarching questions of the international honours conference 2025 'Students Facilitate the Future' in Oslo, by providing an example of an international honours programme. This example illustrates how students from different European countries realize their full potential by working collaboratively on a complex, open-ended problem with no predefined solution—

and how teaching methods support student agency and collaboration, thereby unlocking their full capabilities.

ROC Midden Nederland, one of the largest VET colleges in the Netherlands with over 19,000 students, has been offering honours programmes to its ambitious students for over eight years. The approximately thirty different programmes are divided into four lines: competition, international, specialisation, and over-arching. All these programmes are developed bottom-up in co-creation with ambitious students from all levels.

One of these programmes is Bootcamp Spain, in which students from three countries (Spain, Italy and the Netherlands) collaborate to address a specific issue put forward by an outside agency, in this case the Government of Navarra. This bootcamp is an annual, one-week programme held each Spring and hosted in rotation by participating countries.

Last year, the issue students were asked to address was how young people could be encouraged to spend less time online (Digital Detox). Students had full freedom to develop their own solutions to this complex issue that is both recognizable and with a sense of urgency to them. They were supported by coaches and by experts from the client. Within the limited timeframe available students used a mix of practical research, such as street interviews, and design thinking to come to practical solutions. A further challenge to the students was working in intercultural groups which meant that pre-conceived ideas were not necessarily shared by others and new working methods and communication skills had to be developed to come to a shared solution. Students were selected by their home institutions based on motivation and drive. After the initial selection, a group role test was used to form teams of six students (two from each country). The purpose was to create well-balanced groups with a variety of personalities that could develop effective cooperation within a very limited time frame.

For students, the challenge was threefold: to grasp the complexity of the issue at hand, to develop a comprehensive problem-solving strategy, and to learn to work together as an effective intercultural team, using all the available knowledge and abilities within the team. For students this was indeed a formidable challenge while at the same time they realised that they were given responsibility and agency to solve this in their own way. This honours programme not only enabled them to showcase a wide range of talents but also equipped them with skills that will be important for their future careers.

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