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## **The 'WHY-professional' in HU honours education**

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Honours education has firmly established itself as a programme available in higher professional education in the Netherlands. Honours education meets an ongoing need of a proportion of students (around 5-10%) who want and can do more than the regular (bachelor) programme has on offer. They have a need for an extra challenge to get the best out of themselves and their studies. They are more than averagely motivated to learn. It is not necessarily just students with high grades, but students who want to learn more to develop further and create an impact in professional practice and society.

Honours education at the HU (University of Applied Sciences Utrecht) exists for all curious and ambitious students who are looking for extra challenges to discover and further develop their qualities and talents. Students are given the freedom and responsibility to take charge of their own personal and professional development. The room for experimentation the honours programme offers enables us to lead the way in training future-proof professionals. We live in a swiftly evolving world characterized by dynamics, complexity, and uncertainty, the so called VUCA world: volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (Hoorstra, J. & van Lieshout, H., 2019). Honours education recognizes the pivotal role that honours students will play in shaping this future society.

At the HU we have developed a new profile for these forward-thinking honours students, which we refer to as the "why-professional" (Riteco, A., 2022) This concept builds upon the T-shaped professional model (Guest, 1991 and Brown, 2010) by not only emphasizing broad and deep knowledge and skills but also highlighting the importance of connection. This connection spans inwardly towards self-discovery—understanding who you are, what you

desire, and what you stand for—and outwardly towards societal impact, aiming to make a meaningful difference in the world driven by personal purpose.

Before the launching of the new profile for the honours students, the why-professional, we did literature research about future skills for professionals, e.g. 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills of World Economic Forum (2015) and Top 10 skills of 2025 (WEF). We studied many educational models and human resources theories, e.g. Columbusmodel (2019), Inner Development Goals (2021) and the integral vision of Ken Wilber (Wilber, K., 2000). Models on competences for the future differ in emphasis and choice of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Terminology varies. Nevertheless, comparison of these models reveals a fairly consistent picture of the skills considered relevant for the 21st century by various experts. What stands out is the focus on personal development, i.e. the importance of getting to know yourself. We discovered that there has been a shift in terminology: the term '21st-century skills' is disappearing. Supplanting it is 'digital literacy' as a separate learning area. The remaining skills are called 'broad' skills. The importance of collaboration is much emphasised: crossing boundaries of professions, social groups, culture or nation, as well as a solid knowledge base in one discipline to work together across disciplines from there.

In the beginning we talked about the Y-professional to stress the next level professional in relation to the T-shaped professional, but we changed it into 'why-professional', because of the pronunciation and the importance of the why as in: purpose in the development of the students. We developed a new honours programme, Pioneers. Through this programme that started in 2023-2024, students explore their personal why and undertook impactful projects aligned with that why. Other honours tracks at our university were designed based on the broad professionals' skills discussed above: personal development, active citizenship, entrepreneurship and innovation, communicative and intercultural skills.

To strengthen community building and learning together through all disciplines we started an honours study association for students of the whole university: Polaris (website Polaris). The students' board of this association has written an abstract for this honours conference. Creating a cross-European student community enhances education by promoting intercultural exchange, collaboration, and shared learning experiences. When students from diverse backgrounds come together, they bring unique perspectives, values, and approaches to problem-solving. This diversity enriches discussions and fosters empathy, global awareness, and mutual respect. Collaborative projects across borders—whether through virtual platforms or mobility programs—allow students to learn from one another, challenge assumptions, and co-create knowledge. These experiences not only deepen academic understanding but also contribute to personal growth, as students develop communication skills, adaptability, and a sense of belonging within a broader European context. Our ideas about skills, attitude and mindset that are typical for the why-professional can empower the students who want to make impact in an European context.

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