



JOURNAL OF THE

EUROPEAN HONORS COUNCIL

Note

Students' reflection on the Honours program at the University of Oslo: A discussion of the freedom pillar in honours education in Oslo

Karianne Tangen Dypedahl¹ and Tina Lieng²

1 Student, University of Oslo; kariantd@uio.no

2 Student, University of Oslo; lieng.tina@gmail.com

* Correspondence: kariantd@uio.no, lieng.tina@gmail.com

Received: September 19, 2025; Accepted: September 19, 2025; Published: October 6, 2025

Keywords: Honours education; University of Oslo; Pillars of Honours education

Introduction

Honours programs today is an established part of the US higher education system, with an overarching organisation, the National Collegial Honours Council (NCHC). On the other hand, Europe is still in the beginning phase compared to the US, with Netherlands as the frontrunner. There has been efforts in Europe to create overall structures for honours, with the establishing of the European Collegial Honours Council (ECHC) in 2016. What distinguishes honours programs from regular education is what Wolfenberger (2015) describes as the three pillars; community, academic competence and freedom. In this note we will first give a short introduction to the history of honours education in the US, and the spread of honours education from the US to Europe. Then we will reflect on our own honours education, as former students of the honours program at the University of Oslo, one of the newest honours programs in Europe.

Limitations and clarifications

The authors of this note have both been honours students at the Faculty of Social Science, respectively the first and second group of students from the Social Sciences in the Honours program. Being the first students may mean that some of the experiences we point to in the reflections section were more related to the fact that the program was new and unestablished, and not a characteristic of the honours program itself.

The reflections we make are our own, and based on our own experiences. We believe that the experiences we point to apply to more students, but different experiences and opinions may exist.

The University in Oslo, in addition to the honours bachelor program, offers honours certificate at the master's level which you can add on to any master degree. We limit our reflections to the honours bachelor program.

The notion of honours education is used differently in the United Kingdom (honours latin) compared to how it is understood by the European Honours Council. In the UK, honours is used to classify undergraduate degrees. When discussing European honours education, we therefore leave out the United Kingdom.

This note is partly based on a report written as a summer student research project in 2024 funded by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Education (INTED) at the University of Oslo. Åsne Sakrina Nilsen Engebretsen co-authored the original report.

Background: Honours in the US and Europe

Honours programs are an established part of US higher education. One of the first American honours-programs was founded at Swarthmore College already in 1922 by its president Frank Aydelotte. Aydelotte had a Rhodes Scholarship from Oxford and was inspired by the new educational methodologies he got exposed to under his studies in England (Rinn, 2006, pp. 65-66, p. 70). Today, over half of all US institutions of higher education offer either honours programs, or entire honours colleges as part of their educational catalogue (Wolfensberger, 2015, p. 4). A well-established national organisation for honours programs, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), has been promoting undergraduate honours-education in the US since 1966 (Rinn, 2006, pp. 70-74).

In 1993 the executive committee at the NCHC approved a document consisting of “Sixteen Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honours College”. This document shaped the way honours programs were structured and was the first document to make formal guidelines in the US (Cognard-Black and Smith, 2023, p. 25).

Honours-education in the US can be divided into colleges and programs, with programs accounting for 88% of all honours-education. Public institutions representing 60% of the overall landscape (Scott & Smith, 2016, p. 78). Honours colleges students on average makes up 8% of the university’s total student population (Cognard-Black & Smith, 2023, p. 54). There is a current trend in the increase of the amount of honours colleges and they often emerge form already established programs (Badenhausen, 2023, p 83 ; Cognard-Black and Smith, 2023, p. 32). Dedicated academic spaces and living-learning communities are common among American honours institutions. Academic spaces may include dedicated offices, buildings, libraries, centres, and classrooms, to name a few (Scott et al., 2017, p.203- 222).

Honours education in Europe has shorter traditions than in the US. Wolfenberger (2015), in her influential book *Talent Development in European Higher Education: Honors Programs in the Benelux, Nordic and German-speaking countries*, talks about the lack of an overall structure of honours education in Europe like the one in the US. This inspired the making of the European Honours Council (EHC) and the EHC was established on June 3rd, 2016 (Wolfensberger et al., 2017).

Over half of all European honours programs are located in the Netherlands (Wolfenberger, 2015, p. 241). Netherlands is one of the countries with a lot of focus on honours education and focus on talent development. The excellence programs in the Netherlands have been developed since the 1990’s and was strengthened by the Dutch government in 2008–2014 by a competitive grant programme. The Sirius Program was a way to achieve more “excellence” in higher education, during the Sirius program honours programs were establish at almost all higher education institutions. The large focus in the Netherlands on honours education is modelled by the US approach and is rare elsewhere in Europe (Klemenčič, 2021). For instance, Poland only offers high achieving students finical support, rather than talent development programs (Jones et al., 2019).

In Wolfenberger's (2015) book *Talent Development in European Higher Education*, she examines honours programs in the northern European region. In the other northern-European countries there is an increase in honours programs establishing since the 2000's (p. 252). At the time there were no honours programs established at any higher education institutions in Norway. But Wolfenberger (2015) suggests that there may be ongoing developments to establish honours programs in the future (p. 130-136). Her predictions were right and in 2019 an honours program was established at the University of Oslo (UiO) (NRK, 2018, June 21st). Norway has therefore been a part of the larger honours development in Europe.

The honours program in Oslo

The Honours program in Oslo is fairly newly established and welcomed the first students in 2019. For the first two years, the student group consisted of students from the *Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences* and the *Faculty of Humanities*. The Faculty of Social Sciences was included in 2021. The Honours program accepts around 60 students each year, 20 from each faculty. Students apply directly to the faculty they wish to study at through Samordna opptak (the application system to higher education in Norway). After acceptance students chose their specialization (for instance: Political Science at the Faculty of Social Science). Except from the interdisciplinary honours course that runs each semester (5 ECTS), the study plan follows the normal structure of the disciplinary study program the student has chosen. Considering that the University of Oslo has around 26 500 students (bachelors and masters included) each year, the share of honours students is lower than what is normal at US honours institutions (Universitetet i Oslo, n. d.-a).

Based on Dutch honours programs Wolfensberger et al. (2012) differentiates between three types of honours programs: disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary. Disciplinary programs deepen one's understanding within a discipline. Multidisciplinary programs are a substitute for regular programs, with students constructing their own honours bachelor's degree. Interdisciplinary programs usually have a theme or subject which goes beyond one specific discipline. These subjects are an "add on" to the normal study plan and students come from different departments at the university (s.157). The honours program at the University of Oslo falls into the interdisciplinary category, with Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a common theme that follows the students through all three years of the program.

The three pillars of honours education

Wolfenberger's three pillars of honours education are often described as a way to distinguish honours education from regular education. The three pillars are (1) community, (2) academic competence and (3) freedom. In a study done by Wolfensberger (2015) she finds that these three pillars are more prevalent in honours education than the regular study programs in both the US and Netherlands. (p. 85-86).

Do honours programs outside of the established countries, like the US and Netherlands adopt the three pillars? We will discuss the honours program in Oslo, Norway and how it reflects these pillars.

6. Reflections on the Honours program at the University of Oslo

In this section we will reflect on our own experiences as Honours students at the University of Oslo.

1. *Community pillar*

The community pillar describes the ability to create a community among the honours students inside and outside the classroom. This community strengthens the teaching environment and fosters academic discussions in the group. (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 25) Honours students in Oslo are given access to a dedicated room which only honours students can access. This room (*Abelsstua*) has served as both a place to study and a place to eat lunch and be social. It has also given students the chance to get to know each other across different years. Although it varies between honours students how much they use the dedicated space, it serves as a catalyst to build community among the students. Honours students in Oslo also have an active student association (*HONning*) which organises multiple social events during the academic year. Seeing this, we argue that the community pillar is very much prevalent in the Oslo Honours program.

2. *Academic competence*

The academic competence pillar is the ability to give honours students academic challenges, this entails giving students analytical skills and interdisciplinary thinking (Wolfensberger, 2012, p.26). The goal of the honours program in Oslo is to foster interdisciplinary skills, teamwork and specialize within one topic, the topic is currently artificial intelligence. Students have an honours course each semester where they have guest lectures from different disciplinary backgrounds, debates, teamwork and acquire coding skills. The honours course gives 5 ECTS each semester, which comes in addition to the 30 ECTS students have to complete in their disciplinary program each semester. This gives students a grounded academic background within interdisciplinary collaborations and deeper insight in artificial intelligence. Although honours students do not get deeper skills in their disciplinary program compared to ordinary students, they acquire skills in interdisciplinary subjects and teaching which ordinary students do not. In our experience, the academic competence pillar is also prevalent in the Honours program in Oslo.

3. *Freedom*

The third pillar of honours education is the ability to give students flexibility and freedom in their studies. This also entails getting special guidance from academic staff (Wolfensberger, 2012, p.27). In the honours program in Oslo students are assigned a mentor to help them design their study plan. This helps students choosing elective courses, find research opportunities or other helpful advice for students finding their own career or academic path (Universitetet i Oslo n. d. -b). From our experience it varies how much students have met with their mentor. Some have not met at all, while others have found it very helpful to speak with their mentor and gotten guidance when choosing subjects. This is also found in an evaluation of the mentor-role by the program in May 2025 (Universitetet i Oslo, 2025 May 21st). However, the mentors cannot alter the study plan structure, and therefore it has little effect on giving their students a more flexible study plan.

The program also has progression requirements which can come in conflict with the student's freedom and flexibility to create their own path in their studies. The program requires the students to gain 70 ECTS each year to continue in the honours program (Universitetet i Oslo n. d. -b). This is less flexible compared to a regular study program at UiO, where the progression requirement is minimum 30 ECTS each year (50 % progression) (Universitetet i Oslo, n. d. -c). Students need to follow their honours-cohort in the honours course each semester, and therefore do not have the freedom to finish the honours program in a longer or shorter time

period than the assigned three years. This requirement can be a challenge to some students that want to do several bachelor's degrees at the same time and therefore use longer time to finish the honours bachelor's degree.

Further, the progression requirements become an obstacle for students that take a semester abroad at an internship, for instance at a Norwegian Embassy. These students' risk losing their spot in the program or the administration need to make an exception in each case. The progression requirement also limits the student's ability to finish their bachelor's degree in a shorter time period than three years. This ultimately gives students less freedom compared to a regular program at UiO.

However, there have been some changes in the honours structure in recent years. For instance, it is now possible to finish your degree in two years if you take 100 ECTS the first year and have minimum a B average (Universitetet i Oslo n. d. -b). It seems, as more students have a need to alter the normal study plan, there has been given more flexibility and exceptions to the progression requirements. Furthermore, the program is still relatively new and have room for changes. It is therefore hope that solutions will be implemented for students that want to pursue multiple degrees, internships and research opportunities without this coming in conflict with the progression requirements. Therefore, we assume that as the program develops with time, more freedom and flexibility will be implemented in the program structure at the honours program in Oslo. Still, we argue that an ordinary study program offers more freedom and flexibility for a student compared to the honours study program. This then, constitutes a deviation from Wolfensberger's freedom pillar of honours education.

Concluding remarks

In this note we have shortly summarised the development of Honours programs in the US and Europe. Then we have discussed on how the newly established honours program in Oslo reflects the three pillars of honours education as described by Wolfensberger (2015). Based on our own experience as honours students we argue that *community* and *academic competence* is found in the Oslo-program, while *freedom* is challenged by a strict study plan and progression requirements that is not found in ordinary programs at the University of Oslo.

References

Badenhausen, R. (2023). Should We Start an Honors College? An Administrative Playbook for Working Through the Decision. In R. Badenhausen (Ed.), *Honors in the 21st Century* (p. 83-108). National Collegiate Honors Council.

Cognard-Black, A. J. & Smith, P. J. (2023). Characteristics of the 21st-Century Honors College. In R. Badenhausen (Ed.), *Honors in the 21st Century* (p. 23-82). National Collegiate Honors Council.

Jones, B., Perez, K., & Hogenstijn, M. (2019). Development of talented university students – the case of the United States, the Netherlands, and Poland. In A. Ujwary-Gil & N. R. Potoczek (Eds.), *Organizations in the face of growing competition in the market* (pp. 35–55). <https://doi.org/10.3990/1.9789036542531>

Klemenčič, M. (2021). Honours study programmes as alternative higher education. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 11(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2021.1879371>

NRK. (2018, June 21). *UiO frir til de flinkeste studentene*. Retrieved 12th September 2025 from <https://www.nrk.no/norge/uio-frir-til-de-flinkeste-studentene-med-nytt-bachelorprogram-1.14091875>

Rinn, A. (2006). Major Forerunners to Honors Education at the Collegiate Level. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 7(2), 63-84.

Scott, R. I. & Smith, P. J. (2016). Demography of honors: the National landscape of education. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 17(1), 73-91

Universitetet i Oslo. (2025, May 21). *Evaluering av Honours-programmets mentorordning: Basert på mentor- og studenttilbakemeldinger*. Retrieved 12th September, 2025 from <https://www.uio.no/studier/program/honours-programmet/programrad/2025/innkalling.programradsmote.21.05.25.pdf>

Universitetet i Oslo. (n.d. -a). Tall og fakta. Retrieved 9th September 2025 from <https://www.uio.no/om/tall-og-fakta/>

Universitetet i Oslo. (n.d. -c) *Redusert studieprogresjon* Retrived 12th September 2025 from [Redusert studieprogresjon - Universitetet i Oslo](#)

Universitetet i Oslo. (n.d.-b). *Oppbygging og gjennomføring* Retrieved 12th September 2025 from [Oppbygging og gjennomføring – Samfunnsvitenskap – Universitetet i Oslo](#)

Wolfensberger, M. V. (2012). *Teaching for Excellence: Pedagogies revealed*. Waxmann.

Wolfensberger, M. V., Eijl, P. V., & Pilot, A. (2012). Laboratories for educational innovation: Honors programs in the Netherlands. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 13(2), 149-170.

Wolfensberger, M.V.C. (2015). Talent development in European higher education. Honors Programs in the Benelux, Nordic and German-Speaking Countries. Heidelberg: Springer. <http://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-12919-8>

Wolfensberger, M, Fritz, A, Hogenstijn, M (2017) Introducing the Journal of the European Honors Council. *Journal of the European Honors Council*, vol1 1-4. [Introducing the Journal of the European Honors Council | Journal of the European Honors Council](#)