



Note

When do students flourish?

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When I think about the moments when students truly flourish, they are rarely the ones where the “right” answer is already known. Instead, I see students at their best when they are confronted with complex, open-ended questions, those that have no clear solution and demand creativity, persistence, and courage. These are the moments when students begin to see themselves not just as learners but as contributors, capable of shaping new ideas and insights. I have watched this transformation many times: when a hesitant student suddenly takes ownership of a project or when a group from different disciplines manages to weave their diverse perspectives into something genuinely innovative. This is why honours programs and interdisciplinary teaching methods matter so deeply. They create spaces where students are not only allowed but encouraged to step outside of traditional frameworks.

At my institution, the University College of Upper Austria in Linz (Austria), I work with future teachers who will be responsible for guiding gifted students. Gifted learners, in particular, thrive on challenge but suffer when their learning pace is ignored. In my [doctoral research](#), which I carried out with Marca Wolfensberger, Zsolt Lavicza, and Barbara Sabitzer, I studied the “waiting time” experienced by honours students. Many of them described how often they felt bored or underchallenged, both in secondary schools and at university. What struck me most was their coping strategies: rather than asking for more, they often withdrew, distracting themselves or simply waiting. To me, this was a powerful reminder that student’s talent and potential can be wasted if we, as educators, do not provide the right kinds of opportunities.

Honours education can help address this. When students are trusted with meaningful tasks, the “waiting time” disappears. They no longer sit idle, but instead dive into questions that truly engage them. Interdisciplinary approaches are especially effective because they mirror the complexity of real-world challenges. I have seen how students gain confidence when they realize that their perspective, whether rooted in humanities, science or education, adds

something unique to the discussion. This not only strengthens their academic skills but also builds their sense of agency: the feeling that their contributions matter.

Beyond the classroom, I believe that building a European community of honours students has enormous potential. Learning across borders allows students to see their experiences in a wider context. When they meet peers who face similar struggles, whether it is the frustration of waiting in class, the challenge of managing group dynamics or the excitement of pursuing a self-driven project, they realize they are not alone. This recognition can be liberating and motivating. It also builds intercultural awareness, an essential skill for a world where collaboration rarely stops at national borders.

Personally, I am excited about this conference not only for what I can contribute but also for what I can learn. I am particularly looking forward to discussions around the “Framework for analyzing conceptions of excellence in higher education,” which Michaela Schwinghammer, one of my students, is currently using. Engaging with the very scholars who developed it will be invaluable, both for my student and for my own teaching practice. I see this event as a unique opportunity to connect research, practice, and community building, exactly the kind of interdisciplinary and collaborative spirit that honours education represents.

In the end, the value of honours programs lies not in providing students with a faster track, but in giving them richer and deeper experiences. It is about recognizing their need for challenge, encouraging them to take risks, and supporting them in shaping their own learning paths. When students are given complex problems, when they are encouraged to cross disciplinary boundaries, and when they become part of a wider European network, they do more than demonstrate their potential - they expand it. And as educators, it is our privilege and responsibility to create the conditions in which that growth can happen.