



Australian Honours degrees: The last bastion of quality?

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ABSTRACT

The first tourism Honours degree in Australia was offered almost three decades ago, and since then Honours has become a well-recognised and important offering, particularly in terms of its role as a research pathway. The research-intensive nature of Honours degrees produces graduates who are able to plan and execute project work, undertake research, and demonstrate scholarship with some independence. These skills are highly sought after by some employers. However, Honours programs tend to be 'boutique' offerings and are particularly vulnerable to curriculum rationalisation efforts. The purpose of this research was to explore the value and future of Australian business Honours degrees by examining the perceptions of tourism and business educators. A survey of 100 academics from 21 Australian institutions revealed that Honours is highly valued and considered to be superior as a research training degree in comparison to Masters Coursework Degrees and Masters by Research. However, in an era of increasing austerity the Australian Honours degree has become an oddity and its reputation as the last bastion of quality in undergraduate tourism education is under threat.

1. Introduction

Australian Bachelor Honours degrees originally evolved from Honours degrees in the United Kingdom in the late 19th Century (Kiley, Boud, Manathunga, & Cantwell, 2011; Schweinsberg, Wearing, & McManus, 2013) and are commonly considered to be one of the major pathways to further research training (Schweinsberg et al., 2013). The programs also offer a pathway that allows undergraduate students "to develop their talents to the full" (Scager, Akkerman, Pilot, & Wubbels, 2013, p. 115). Despite their importance, Honours degrees typically attract small, elite cohorts and for this reason many Australian universities are reviewing and reducing the number of Honours programs available to students. Honours degrees also tend to receive little attention by academics as a research topic (Schweinsberg & McManus, 2006). While program review processes are usually supported by internal research and reporting, surprisingly little research has been published in the academic literature on perceptions and outcomes of Australian Honours degrees (Manathunga, Kiley, Boud, & Cantwell, 2012; Romano & Smyrnios, 1996). In fact, given that Honours is considered a direct pathway for entry to a MPhil or PhD, it is also surprising that so little research has been undertaken about Honours programs even in a broader context. Indeed, there is little research on why students choose to undertake any research degree (McCulloch, Guerin, Jayatilaka, Calder, & Ranashinghe, 2017). And yet, Honours is

important as it can be regarded as a test of a student's potential as well as a mark of transition from coursework to research-based study (Schweinsberg & McManus, 2006).

While the lack of research about Honours programs may initially be surprising, it is important to note that this type of qualification is not offered in many major education markets (notably North America and Europe). Honours degrees are much more prevalent in Commonwealth countries but there are major differences between countries and disciplines. Clearly, this omits enquiry across many countries and therefore reduces research potential to the handful of countries that offer Honours. These differences may partly explain the paucity of research on Honours programs.

In Australia, Honours plays an important role in transitioning students interested in pursuing a research future. Honours is a recognised focus in many disciplines and has a long tradition in many of the disciplines that inform the tourism field (e.g. geography, sociology, psychology anthropology, economics). That tourism was not a distinct discipline was considered by Leiper (1981) to be preventing the advancement of tourism, due to the burden of "the fragmented body of knowledge" (p.82). Although, in tourism, there remains disagreement about whether tourism is a distinct discipline, a field of study, or merely an academic community (Taillon, 2014).

Honours is considered a 'research apprenticeship' that leads to direct entry into a PhD program if the mark obtained by the student is at a

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high enough standard. Alternatively, at a high level, Honours graduates can be admitted into a Masters by research. Honours achievements are also an important criterion in the assessment of PhD scholarships in Australia. Arguably, the importance of Honours programs in the provision of research training should create more scholarly discussion than has been the case.

Perhaps, given the lack of research into Honours, it is unsurprising that some institutions in Australia have considered discontinuing Honours programs. Given the importance of the program and the discussion of potential discontinuation at various institutions in Australia, it is timely to consider how Honours programs are perceived by educators. The purpose of this research is to explore the value and future of Australian business Honours degrees by examining the perceptions of tourism and business educators.

2. Literature review

The first tourism Honours degree in Australia was offered by James Cook University in the early 1990s (Backer & Benckendorff, 2016). Modelled on the UK approach to Honours degrees, the Honours year was embedded into the final year of a four-year program, with students required to meet a specified Grade Point Average (GPA) to gain entry to the Honours stream. Students who did not meet the GPA requirement worked on team projects in their fourth year and received a “pass” degree. Many other Australian institutions introduced tourism Honours programs throughout the 1990s and 2000s but most of these programs were designed as an optional additional year completed after a three-year undergraduate Bachelor degree. This second approach has prevailed in the Australian marketplace and exists not only for tourism studies, but disciplines within the broader business field. In some universities, Honours programs are designed and marketed as standalone qualifications, allowing students to transfer to another institution to complete their honours year. In these cases, students are awarded a bachelor qualification from the first institution as well as a Bachelor Honours qualification from the institution offering the honours program.

Honours programs are commonly found in Commonwealth countries, although several models are evident. According to Draper and Hitchcock (2013), Honours degrees follow one of four different models. The first model consists of an award that is added to the degree title to denote exceptional performance in a Bachelor pass degree. This appears to be the dominant model in the United Kingdom. The second type of Honours model is an embedded program where Honours requirements are completed in the same timeframe as a Bachelor pass degree. The third type of model is that of a research-oriented undergraduate program that includes research courses throughout all years.

In the fourth model, an Honours qualification consists of an additional year added to an existing three-year Bachelor degree. This additional year provides further research training and the opportunity to complete a research thesis or project under academic supervision. Most Australian Honours degrees follow this model and the absence of an Honours classification in Bachelor qualification does not signify an insufficient or inferior level of undergraduate academic performance (Kiley, Boud, Cantwell, & Manathunga, 2009). In the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), Bachelor degrees are regarded as level 7 qualifications, while coursework Masters Degrees are positioned as level 9 programs. Honours degrees are considered to be an undergraduate qualification but they are included in the AQF as a level 8 qualification – the same level as Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas. This creates somewhat of a conundrum for many universities because the entry requirements and quality of Honours students are often higher than for Masters Coursework degrees.

New Zealand and South Africa have similar Honours models to Australia, although in South Africa Honours is considered to be a postgraduate degree (Manathunga et al., 2012). However, like Australia, the South African Honours is classified as level 8 through the

Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) and must include a major research component to ensure that graduates are able to conduct “independent and authentic field-specific research at an Honours level” (Rashied & Inglesi-Lotz, 2017, p.111). These differences highlight that Honours can mean different things in different countries and in different disciplines, resulting in further confusion.

In Australia, the undergraduate classification of Honours degrees means that domestic students are able to fund their Honours study through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), so that the additional year of study can be undertaken without upfront fees. This is not the case for Masters degrees, which are classified as postgraduate programs. For many students, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the ability to defer the payment of fees may be a critical element in providing an affordable pathway to undertake a Doctor of Philosophy.

According to the AQF, “the Bachelor Honours Degree qualifies individuals who apply a body of knowledge in a specific context to undertake professional work and as a pathway for research and further learning” (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 16). The framework further advises that graduates should display “a coherent and advanced knowledge of the underlying principles and concepts in one or more disciplines and knowledge of research principles and methods” (p.16). This outcome is typically achieved by including a substantial research thesis component, supported by further research coursework in the Honours program. Although students are required to demonstrate a degree of autonomy, the thesis component is usually supervised by an academic with expertise in the field following a master-apprentice model of teaching.

Honours programs are typically seen as attracting high-achieving students, and according to Wolfensberger (2012) “there is definitely something ‘special’ about working with honors students, though it may be difficult to pinpoint” (p. 11). The research-intensive nature of Honours Degrees produces graduates who are able to plan and execute project work, research and scholarship with some independence. These skills are particularly sought after in public sector roles, but Honours qualifications are also valued by NGOs and larger companies.

Past research has shown that Honours graduates tend to be more successful and are promoted faster than people who do not have Honours Degrees (Romano & Smyrnios, 1996). Honours graduate starting salaries have been found to be 6.8% higher than the starting salaries of graduates from Bachelor programs. However, the starting salaries for dual degrees were also 5.9% higher than single degrees, suggesting that while Honours qualifications attract a premium, employers may simply value the additional time spent ‘maturing’ in a formal education setting rather than the research training provided by an Honours program (Graduate Careers Australia, 2009). Honours graduates have reported that their Honours degree gave them a competitive edge over non-Honours students (Romano & Smyrnios, 1996). In Australia, Honours programs are also a common pathway to PhD study and have been found to be a good predictor success in Higher Degree Research programs (Kiley, Moyes, & Clayton, 2009).

While Honours degrees have been described as having “so much prestige and so venerable a tradition that only very serious and systemic changes could justify the question as to whether the classification has a future” (Elton, 2004, p. 415), scrutiny has taken place. Many Australian institutions have recently reviewed and rationalised the number of Honours programs available to students. There are several reasons for these developments. One key reason is that Honours programs typically attract small, ‘elite’ cohorts of students and as a result they are often regarded as ‘loss leaders’ in an institution's portfolio of programs, making them vulnerable to cost cutting initiatives (Mitsis, 2015). Whilst the Honours model in the USA is different to that in Australia, the same pressures on faculty budgets have resulted in program consolidation (Jacobs, 2015). Adding to the pressures are the rising costs of education, which make it increasingly difficult for students to justify extending their time at University unless they feel strongly that the

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