Chapter 1

Introduction

Why and under what conditions are honors programs in higher education developed across Europe? And what is the current situation regarding talent development and excellence? These questions came up at meetings of the Sirius Programme,¹ a national program promoting excellence in higher education in the Netherlands.

The attention for excellence is growing in the Dutch higher education system. Most higher education institutions (HEIs) have now set up honors courses, programs or colleges (Wolfensberger 2012, p. 15). But this is a relatively recent development. The first programs started in 1993 (Wolfensberger et al. 2004, p. 120); their establishment was quite a struggle, as they did not fit very well in the egalitarian Dutch culture.

Since 2008, the Sirius Programme supports Dutch HEIs in fostering excellence among their students. The program ‘aims to gain insights into how excellence can best be supported and to examine what barriers to this currently exist’ (Auditcommission Sirius Programme et al. 2012, p. 2). At the time of writing, 23 institutions participate in the program and 19 of those have received grants to develop and support programs of excellence in the bachelor and/or master phase.² The Sirius Programme is financed by the Dutch ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

Over the last few years, Sirius member institutions and program coordinators increasingly started looking across the Dutch borders for inspiration and cooperation.³ Honors experts in the Netherlands knew from personal contacts that some programs

¹ This program resides under the National Platform Science & Technology and is supported by the ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

² In total, 24 HEIs have taken part in the Sirius Programme, one of which has ended its participation early. Four institutions took part, but did not receive subsidies. The programs are regularly evaluated by the Audit Commission of the Sirius Programme. In addition, best practices are described in a number of (Dutch-language) publications.

³ For instance, in 2012, a group of honors educators from HEIs participating in the Sirius Programme undertook a 3-day study trip to Denmark, where they were introduced to different talent support programs in higher education (Sirius Programma 2012).

do exist in different European countries. In a 2005 report, Dutch researchers found ‘incidental initiatives to offer something to talented students’ in other European countries (Van Eijl et al. 2005, p. 143).⁴ A structural inventory of excellence initiatives in European higher education had never been made.

This book is a first step to create such an overview. A research team under the leadership of Dr. Marca Wolfensberger from the Research Centre for Talent Development in Higher Education and Society at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences in Groningen (the Netherlands) has reviewed special talent provisions for almost four million students at 303 higher education institutions in 11 countries. Furthermore, the honors programs that were found are placed within their national and international contexts, including the local culture towards excellence and the structure of the national education system. This could only be achieved with the help and contributions of local experts. Twenty experts from all 11 countries have commented on the chapters about their respective country. All these people made important contributions to the aim of this book: to share knowledge about talent development and honors education and provide an overview of educational offers to talented students in the countries involved.

1.1 Europe and USA

We refer to educational offers for talented students in higher education mostly as ‘honors programs’. This book originates in the Netherlands and here, this is a well-known and accepted term for these offers. In other countries, terminology can be more contested and the term ‘honors’ might be more politically charged.⁵ We are aware of this, but for reasons of clarity we will stick to the term.

What is honors education and where does it come from? The concept of ‘honors’ we refer to in this book is focused on providing extra opportunities to talented students. It is best known from the American context (see Aydelotte 1944; Lamb 2012),⁶ although the concept of ‘honours’ seems to originate from Oxford University (Lamb 2012, p. 20).⁷ It is still widely used in higher education throughout

⁴The researchers mainly found information about the US, Canada and Australia. They concluded that apart from the incidental initiatives ‘honors programs are not known in France, Germany, the UK, Denmark, Switzerland and Belgium (Flemish community)’.

⁵For example in Germany, the term ‘honors’ is specifically mentioned in educational law, stating that it cannot be used on bachelor diplomas. More info on this issue can be found in the chapter about Germany.

⁶Honors education in the US was inspired by the work of Frank Aydelotte. In this book we use American-English spelling and therefore we talk about honors programs instead of honours programmes. We make two exceptions. First, if programs have an official name in British spelling, we use this name. Second, if we quote directly from sources using British spelling.

⁷According to Lamb, ‘Oxford is the educational institution that inspired pioneering U.S. honors educators early in the twentieth century’.

the United Kingdom (UK) (Lamb 2012, p. 22–26). However, the concept was awarded a different meaning in the UK over the years. British HEIs now use the term honours in their undergraduate degree qualification system.⁸ This is not the honors education we refer to in this book.

In the United States (US), about half of the 4,000 universities and colleges have an official strategy of honors education (Wolfensberger 2012, p. 13). A strong nationwide organization of honors programs exists: the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) is the professional association of undergraduate honors programs.⁹ In 2012, the NCHC devoted a special issue of its journal emphasizing honors programs around the globe, for the first time in its history. Apart from the Netherlands, European countries were not very prominently represented.¹⁰

While there is a lack of specific information about provisions for talented and gifted students in European *higher education*, provisions for talented and gifted students in the European education systems *in general* form a topical and hotly debated subject. In the period from 2000 to 2005, three international overviews of provisions and policies around this issue were made by scientific researchers (Persson et al. 2000; Freeman 2002a, b; Mönks and Pflüger 2005).¹¹ However, focus was on primary and secondary education and little specific information about higher education was found. In 2006, a European overview called ‘Specific Educational Measures to Promote all Forms of Giftedness at School in Europe’ was presented in a Eurydice working document (Eurydice 2006). Special attention was paid to definitions of giftedness and local terminology, but the focus centered on primary and secondary education.

A few years of silence followed, but from 2011 international publications on talent development in European countries started pouring in again. During 2011–2012, Hungarian researchers, working in the Talent Centre Budapest, wrote a two-volume

⁸ Generally speaking, there are three classes of honours degrees. On average, a first class honours degree is awarded to around 15 % of the degree candidates.

⁹ See nchchonors.org for more information. In addition, HERU (Honors Education at Research Universities) organizes a bi-annual meeting for honors educators at reserach universities. See for example heru2015.com.

¹⁰ Almost half of this issue was taken up by articles from or about the Netherlands. Other articles in the journal included descriptions of programs or experiences in the UK, Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Mexico and Switzerland.

¹¹ The first was a chapter called ‘Gifted education in Europe: Programs, practices and current research’ in the ‘International handbook of giftedness and talent’ (Persson et al. 2000). This was followed by British professor Joan Freeman’s two-volume report called ‘Out-of-school provisions for the gifted and talented around the world’, written for the British department of Education and Skills. Freeman made a long list of recommendations, including ‘the establishment of a network of models and centres of excellence around the world’ (Freeman 2002a, b). Two years later, the German education ministry asked researchers Franz Mönks and Robin Pflüger to do a survey with a slightly different approach, focusing on ‘gifted education’ for high-achieving children in all levels of education in 21 European countries. They concluded that ‘there is a dynamic growth of gifted education in Europe’, but most programs and developments found were aimed at children in primary and secondary education (Mönks and Pflüger 2005, p. 156). Van Eijl et al. (2005), in a report ordered by the Dutch Council of Education (Onderwijsraad), described some examples of honors programs at HEIs outside the Netherlands that were known to them, but found little information about the countries included in this book.

report about best practices in talent support in education in different countries (Györi 2011, 2012).¹² Although they mainly focused on programs in primary and secondary education, they also provided interesting information about the relations between policy development and talent programs. In 2013, the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* devoted two issues to the theme ‘International Perspectives on Gifted Education and Talent Development’. This included articles about the current state of affairs in Hungary, Poland, Finland, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Austria and more generally about German-speaking Europe.¹³ The articles provided useful and relevant insights about gifted education at all educational levels in some countries, but still no systematic overview of honors programs in European higher education was available.

In the same year, questions about talent development came up at EU meetings, more specifically in the European Economic and Social Committee. On its own initiative, this committee wrote an opinion titled ‘Unleashing the Potential of Children and Young People with High Intellectual Abilities in the European Union’ (EESC 2013). The committee recognized that providing a challenging education to these young people is very important. All ten recommendations urgently stress the need for more action by the EU member states. This is not only because it is important for young talents themselves, but also ‘to prevent the brain drain whereby more able people leave for other parts of the world in which to use their talents’ (ibid., section 3.3.8).

1.2 Three Clusters of Countries

The focus of this book is on three clusters of countries in northern and central Europe (Map 1.1): the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg), the Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland) and the German-speaking countries (Germany, Switzerland, Austria). These countries are all somewhat similar to the Netherlands, where this study originates. They are all relatively rich countries with a well-developed education system and are all quite far in the Bologna Process.¹⁴ Therefore they form relatively comparable contexts for the development of honors education. Also, the understanding of the concept ‘honors’ (if present) in these countries refers mostly to the American situation with special

¹² The second volume included not only examples from Europe, but also from other countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Singapore and Vietnam.

¹³ Kimberley L. Chandler was guest editor for these issues, which were published as issues 36(1) and 36(3) of the journal. More information at jeg.sagepub.com.

¹⁴ The Bologna Process is a series of agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications, starting with a joint declaration in the Italian city of Bologna in 1999. The Lisbon Recognition Convention is one of its main instruments, creating comparable academic degree standards. See the list of terms and abbreviations for explanation of terminology.

Table 1.1 Basic characteristics of researched countries (Eurostat 2014)

Country	Inhabitants (millions) ^a	GDP per capita in euros ^a	Unemployment rate ^a
Austria	8.5	32,200	4.8
Belgium	11.2	29,600	8.4
Denmark	5.6	37,200	7.0
Finland	5.4	30,900	8.3
Germany	82.0	30,200	5.2
Iceland	0.3	32,900	5.3
Luxembourg	0.5	62,600	6.0
Netherlands	16.8	32,700	7.0
Norway	5.0	52,800	3.3
Sweden	9.6	35,300	7.9
Switzerland	8.0	44,600	n/a

^aPopulation numbers for 2013, GDP per capita for 2012, unemployment for October 2013 (based on International Labour Organization definition)

‘honors programs’, rather than the British situation, where ‘honours’ is mostly used as a classification system for degrees.¹⁵

Some basic characteristics of the countries are shown in Table 1.1. Germany is by far the largest country in this study, in terms of population. Luxembourg is the richest country, measured in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, while Norway has the lowest unemployment rate (Table 1.1).

More data relevant for the education system in the 11 countries will follow in Chap. 2.

1.3 Five Parts

The main text of the book is divided into 5 parts, comprising 17 chapters. A sixth part includes literature and appendixes.

1. Part I: Introducing honors in northern Europe. Here the concept of honors is explained and a working definition is presented. Also, factors influencing the development of honors programs are presented and methodological choices are discussed;
2. Part II: The Benelux countries. This consists of a short introduction and chapters for each country. This includes overviews of the national education systems, focused on access to higher education and provisions for excellent students. The local culture towards excellence is described, as well as government policy on this issue. Finally, existing honors programs per institution are presented;

¹⁵ In this respect, the British Isles differ strongly from the continental European countries. They were therefore not included in this study.

Map 1.1 Countries in research project Talent Development in European Higher Education

3. Part III: The Nordic countries. This is similar to the country chapters as described above;
4. Part IV: The German-speaking countries (*idem*);
5. Part V: Honors in northern Europe: a comparative perspective. In this final part, the findings in the different countries will be compared and analyzed, learned lessons are shared and suggestions for further research are made.

Finally, the literature is included, as well as appendixes including key links, contact details of the different programs and one-page interviews with key persons involved in honors education.

The creation of this book is a truly internationally collaborative effort. Hundreds of contact persons at HEIs in 11 countries have responded to inquiries from the research team by phone or e-mail. Fourteen key persons from 7 countries were interviewed, and 20 local experts from all 11 countries have checked the chapters about their respective country. Apart from the author, one project leader, seven honors students and one cartographer have helped to prepare the manuscript.

In addition, three experts from the Netherlands have read and commented on the whole book. Four anonymous reviewers at Springer have given valuable comments on an earlier version of this manuscript. Professor Kevin Dean and honors alumnus Michael Jendzurski from West Chester University (USA) performed a final check on language and readability.

The research team found it a telling sign that most people that were approached for information were very willing to help. This is an indication of the need to share knowledge about this subject.

We see the primary audience for this book as scholars, researchers, policy makers, teachers and students involved in the subject ‘excellence in education’ in general and in higher education in particular. Hopefully this book inspires them to cooperate and learn from experiences in other countries.

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¹⁶ **Note:** Literature used to prepare this book is included on this list. Some of the entries are in local languages and have not been read completely by the researchers. Instead, they have been searched with keywords to retrieve relevant information.

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