

Chapter 16

Perspectives on Talent Development in European Higher Education

The time has come for a sustainable and structural approach that leads to a change of culture in education. I strive for an ambitious culture of learning, for a challenging education. We cannot be satisfied with sufficient grades, always getting better is the norm. (Dutch Deputy Minister of Education Sander Dekker in a letter to parliament; Rijksoverheid 2014, p. 11, own translation)

In the Netherlands, where this study originates, quite an extensive infrastructure exists to provide talented and motivated students with extra options to work on their personal development. For the national government, talent development is a priority. Most Dutch HEIs have honors programs, and the nationwide Sirius Programme specifically focuses on this subject. Moreover, scientific research on honors programs has been conducted in the Netherlands since the late 1990s and has influenced the development and design of programs and their embeddedness in the wider society. Research has focused – among other things – on the educational philosophy behind honors programs, its effects on both the participants and on regular education, the culture of honors education, the didactics of honors educators, and the relationships between honors education and future professional development (Wolfensberger and Pilot 2014).¹ In the Netherlands, excelling as a student is no longer an individual hobby; it has now become an institutionalized possibility (ibid).

Good honors education is dynamic and ongoing. Honors educators are usually very open to new ideas and interested in trying out new things. Over the last few years, Dutch honors educators and the Sirius Programme increasingly looked across the Dutch borders for inspiration and cooperation. Questions came up about honors programs and excellence policies in other countries. The main questions for this book were: Why and under what conditions are honors programs in higher education developed in 11 northern European countries? And what is the current situation regarding talent development and excellence in those countries? To answer these questions, we reviewed the special provisions for talented students at 303 higher

¹A short overview of Dutch research on honors education and honors programs is provided by these authors.

education institutions in 11 countries, with almost four million students altogether. We described the culture towards excellence in all countries, as well as government policies on the subject of excellence in education. We identified key players in the field of excellence and made an overview of local terminology. Interviews with key persons completed the picture.

In this chapter, we discuss our conclusions. We explore the ideological and institutional factors that explain the development of honors programs. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings. One thing is immediately clear: research on provisions for excellent students in higher education in Europe is scarce and further research is definitely needed to get a complete picture.

16.1 Five Basic Conclusions

Our main goal in this book was to explore the development of honors programs in 11 European countries. As this is a first structural inventory of such programs, we did not quite know what to expect. We tried to find as many programs and as much information on talent development as possible. Because of the enormous amount of information that became available, we had to limit our search. We decided not to include talent development programs in sports and arts education, as this type of education deserves special attention for its specific focus on talent development in curricula and pedagogies.

Looking at the general picture in the 11 countries in this book, we can draw five basic conclusions about talent development in general and honors programs in particular.

1. First, we can conclude that from the early 2000s, *talent development has been put higher on the agenda*. The culture towards talent development has become more positive and has received a place in most educational philosophies. A growing number of honors programs now exist in the 11 European countries studied in this book.
2. Second, *the Netherlands clearly is the front-runner* in the development of honors programs. All Dutch research universities and all large universities of applied sciences have developed honors education, although student participation highly varies among HEIs and is still quite low overall. In all other countries in this book, the number of programs is still limited. The Dutch experience also shows that, generally speaking, research universities are the first HEIs that develop honors programs, later followed by universities of applied sciences. Of course, there are innovators, early adapters, and late adapters in each type of institution.
3. Thirdly, if we move away from higher education and look at talent development in general, we see that, in many countries, *focus is on provisions for children in primary and secondary education*. In all countries, there are at least some measures or programs which give talented children opportunities to further develop themselves. Often, these provisions are based on cognitive skills. For students in higher education, these structures are not widely available. If talent development

is recognized within higher education, it is usually in teacher education. This is of course important but also very limited. From the Dutch experience, it seems honors programs in higher education start to be developed some time after programs for gifted and talented students in primary and secondary education are initiated. This may also – but does not need to – be the case in other countries.

4. Fourthly, we can conclude that *structures to support honors education are mostly lacking*. Within countries, there is little organization. So far, the Netherlands is the only country with a nationwide organization to bring honors programs from different HEIs together.² The Sirius Programme is also the only government-funded program subsidizing the development of new forms of honors education. Only in the German state of Bavaria a somewhat similar structure is found, in the government-subsidized Excellence Network of Bavaria. Most other existing networks are focused on gifted education in general and do not specifically target higher education.³ However, they may start to do so in the future. Promising developments are the increased attention for higher education in Austria's ÖZBF, while in the Nordic countries, the Nordic Talent Network is in development. A stronger support structure and network for honors education in Europe would certainly help its further development. At the moment, programs are very nationally oriented and there is no international network in honors education.
5. Finally, a *common terminology is lacking*. Giftedness, talents, excellence, high ability, honors: a myriad of terms is possible to refer to the people and programs in this book. All terms have slightly different implications, depending on the context, culture, and tradition in which they are used (see also Laine 2010 on this issue). In addition, there are also many local terms with their own meanings and political implications. Scientists do not agree on terminology either, nor on the question if talent should be defined in terms of outstanding performances or in terms of potential. This is problematic for everyone involved. In a 2006 working document about giftedness in 30 European countries, this problem was also recognized. The official terminology was even mapped, with most terms referring to variations on the words gifted and talented or combinations (Eurydice 2006). In three Nordic countries, no official definition was found whatsoever (ibid, p. 8). This is a reflection of the local culture, and it implies that terminology is politically charged. For example, in Sweden, you cannot talk about talents, and in Norway, the word elite is taboo. For research purposes, this means that programs can be hard to find. To put it positively, it provides a challenge, and gains can be made if agreement is reached on the use of terminology among researchers and/or policy makers.

While the last two conclusions indicate that there are great challenges for the further development of honors education, we are positive about the future. This positive outlook is partly a result of the creation process of this book. Although

²Outside Europe, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) is a strong and well-established network in the USA.

³International networks focused on gifted education, such as ECHA, are present in all countries in this book, although their influence differs.

developments are sometimes still very limited, enthusiasm for honors education has spread over the Benelux, Nordic and German-speaking countries. In all countries, contacts were very willing to help the researchers and learn from “honors experiences” in other countries. Almost all HEIs we approached gave us information about their provisions for talented students. We found many individuals who clearly recognize the need to provide talented students with the best possible education and are willing to put a lot of effort into the realization of their vision. Such pioneering individuals are central to the development of honors education. At the same time, policy makers in HEIs and governments in many countries have also started to focus on talent development and they see the possibilities of honors education. Among all groups, widespread interest in the results of this explorative and comparative research project was shown. We think this book clearly fulfills the need for a structured overview of provisions for talented students in different countries.

Keeping our basic conclusions in mind, we now analyze the current development of honors programs throughout the Benelux, Nordic and German-speaking countries in more depth. We also look at what we can expect for the future. Before starting our main analysis at the national level, we first need to make some remarks about scale and the supranational context.

16.2 Scale and the Supranational Context

Geographical questions of scale and networks turn out to be very relevant for the development and characteristics of honors programs. This is especially clear if we look “up” from the national scale to the supranational context in which these programs are developed. Four elements are important: research and rankings at the global level and the Bologna Process and Horizon 2020 at the European level.

16.2.1 Research

First, HEIs and especially research universities operate in the global field of scientific research. This is a field with its own rules about the appreciation of excellence. Basically, the best research is published in the most-cited journals. Countries wishing to score well in this international playing field have to abide by the system rules. Some countries develop programs to improve their relative position. Examples are the German Excellence Initiative and the Norwegian Center of Excellence program. These programs can have spin-off effects into the education side of HEIs. Both in Germany and in Norway, this has been the case: a few years after the introduction of an excellence program on the research side, a similar program focusing on education was introduced. At the same time, the international “rat race” in scientific research can also lead to less focus on education among top scientists. These top scientists only have limited time and have to choose how to spend this. Their choice is influenced by what their employers, the HEIs, appreciate. If emphasis is on research, they might see education as less important.

16.2.2 *Rankings*

A second element from the global context influencing the development of honors programs at the national level are educational achievements in international rankings. Unsatisfactory results on such rankings can be a strong incentive for making structural changes in the education system, including the development of programs focusing on excellence.

University rankings, such as the Shanghai Ranking (ARWU 2013) or the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (2014), are mostly focused on research achievements (and therefore subject of much debate). The rankings are not directly related to the development of honors programs, but indirectly, there can be a link. Again, we refer to the German and Norwegian programs as examples. In Germany, one of the official aims of the Excellence Initiative was the creation of “globally competitive universities.” In Norway, the Center of Excellence in research program was developed first, and subsequently, a Center of Excellence in education program was developed as a spin-off. One of the “side effects” of both initiatives is that talking about excellence has become more common throughout the university system. This discussion can take many directions, not necessarily leading to development of honors education.

Another relevant international ranking is the PISA report, recording 15-year-olds’ achievements. Earlier reports have been an incentive for major changes in the education system in, for example, Norway, where teacher education was restructured. The PISA 2012 report, published in late 2013, has come as a shock to a number of countries. Sweden scored particularly low and the call for change is very loud there. More focus on differentiation and the development of excellence programs could be a way forward.

16.2.3 *Bologna Process and Horizon 2020*

Thirdly, a major development throughout higher education in Europe is the Bologna Process. This process to harmonize higher education standards has led to changes in the educational structures in many European countries since 1999. Sometimes the opportunity was seized to really “shake up” the system, while in other countries, changes were limited. National traditions remain strong and relevant to understand national higher education systems. The relationship between research universities and universities of applied sciences is still very different among the countries in this study. For example, in Iceland, there is no difference made at all. On the other hand, Norway has a complicated system including university colleges, specialized university colleges, and full universities. Language can also lead to confusion. In Sweden, for example, many HEIs call themselves *högskola* in Swedish but university on their international webpage.

Although the impact differs, the Bologna Process is important in all 11 countries. Among other things, it has facilitated an easier flow of students between European countries, for example, by the introduction of the uniform ECTS credit system. Many study programs now have an international appeal. However, HEIs offering honors programs do not seem to fully use the possibilities in the Bologna Process. Offering honors programs could be one way for HEIs to distinguish themselves on the international student “market,” but this is hardly done. Most honors programs explicitly focus on “local” students and are conducted in the local language. In many cases, an English-language webpage is not available or very limited.⁴

Some programs explicitly mention their international focus, for example, the “Liberal Arts” style honors colleges in the Netherlands and Freiburg (Germany), which offer their study programs in English. Another example is the University of Southern Denmark’s Research in Corporate Communication program. We also found that certain fields are very international in nature, such as business-related studies. Programs are usually conducted in English and many foreign students are enrolled, either as full-time or exchange student. National borders are not very important for such study programs, which is also shown in the development of the international CEMS-MIM program (discussed in Chap. 3).

Such examples show that the national scale is not automatically the only relevant scale for analysis of honors education. Instead, developments at different scales can play their roles simultaneously.

Another development at the European level is the increasing importance of EU programs for research funding. In the new Horizon 2020 program, around 80 billion euros is available for the period 2014–2020. Institutions that have clear strategies to operate in an international playing field have better chances to attract funds from this program. Horizon 2020 focuses strongly on rewarding excellent research. Great opportunities to connect this to excellent teaching and involve excellent students in international networks are present here.

16.3 Factors at the National Scale

Still, every talented student starts in a certain national education system. For the moment, this remains the most important context in which honors education takes place and therefore a logical starting point for analysis. So to analyze the development of honors programs, we now return to the factors that influence this in specific national contexts, as identified in Chap. 2 (see Box 16.1). These factors could be identified as either more ideological (factors 1–3) or more institutional in nature (factors 4–6). The importance of international rankings (factor 7) has already been discussed above, and we will discuss the role of innovators and pioneers in the next chapter.

⁴See list of key links and contact details for honors programs in Appendixes 2 and 3.

Box 16.1: Factors Influencing the Development of Honors Programs in a Specific National Context

Ideological factors:

1. Culture towards excellence
2. Political views towards excellence
3. Educational philosophy

Institutional factors:

4. Structure and selectiveness of education system
5. Competition between institutions
6. Labor market conditions
7. National results in comparative research

Other factor:

8. Innovators and pioneers

16.4 Ideological Factors

Approaches towards excellence are very dependent upon national culture. An atmosphere where people involved in these programs are proud of their achievements and do not feel the need to downplay their involvement in order to “fit in” is crucial for long-term positive outcomes. As Hungarian researcher Janos Györi concluded from two volumes of studies of talent support programs throughout the world: “the best talent education method is to provide a talent-friendly social space” (2012, p. 227). A culture where talent is valued and appreciated is very important for the success of talent development programs.

For the European countries in this book, this is not obvious. We have seen that they all have an egalitarian tradition to a certain extent, although its origins and its current strength are very different. In some countries, culture towards excellence is ambivalent and developments may seem contradictory at first sight. We discuss the ideological factors per cluster of countries to make this clear.

16.4.1 *The Nordic Countries*

The egalitarian tradition is especially strong in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland). It is expressed in the Law of Jante with its basic saying “you are not to think you are special or that you are any better than us.” People from the Nordic countries referred to this “law” so often and so spontaneously that its importance should not be underestimated. It implicates that the

individual cannot stand out from the group and therefore any reference to excellence has to be institutionalized as a group measure. There are exceptions of course: areas where it is unavoidable to distinguish individual talents. Appreciating excellence in sports and arts is well accepted in all countries presented in this book. Even in very egalitarian countries such as Sweden and Norway, entry to study programs in the arts is based on a very individual-based admission procedure.

While the selectiveness of higher education also extends to other study programs in Nordic countries, the individual approach is restricted to the arts. For other programs, a strict selection on the basis of exam results is made. This seems contradictory to the egalitarian culture at first sight but can be understood when approached from an institutional point of view. Only a limited number of student seats are available in the institutions, and therefore, a way has to be found to find the right group to fill the seats. Selection is thus an institutional measure. Using grades is seen as the most honest way, giving equal opportunities to all. The institutionality of this approach is also shown by the fact that, generally speaking, selection is not left to the HEI's discretion, but coordinated nationally through a special agency.

While the egalitarian tradition is strong, slow changes in the culture are present and were also referred to by the interviewees, especially in Denmark. In this country, honors programs have developed in recent years. Several interviewees have suggested that the other Nordic countries are slowly following the Danish example in this respect. They point to different outside developments that cause this slow culture change, like the impact of globalization, competition from other countries for the best researchers, and achievements on international rankings, as discussed above.

16.4.2 *The Benelux*

While an egalitarian philosophy is dominant in the Nordic countries, the Benelux countries tend more towards an equal opportunity philosophy. This implies that more emphasis is placed on meeting the individual needs of different students. Development of provisions for talents is more likely.

In the Netherlands, political support for talent development in education has become broad and stable in recent years. This could be seen as the result of a culture change, which has been set in motion around the time of the development of the first honors programs in the 1990s. One explanation for the early development of honors education in the Netherlands might be that ties between the Netherlands and the USA are traditionally strong. Detailed research about how exactly honors education has spread from the USA to the Netherlands and throughout Europe could shed more light on the relevant networks that have enabled this trend.

In any case, talent development has established itself as a stable theme in Dutch government policy in recent years. The Sirius Programme with subsidies available to start honors programs ended in 2014, but it has always been clear that this

program was a temporary measure. The main goal was to stimulate honors education to take a structural place in the Dutch higher education landscape. How this will take shape exactly is still subject of debate. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education remains focused on excellence. It has announced new measures to foster talent in compulsory education (Rijksoverheid 2014).

Belgium is slowly following the Dutch example in the development of honors education. Here, the initiative is mostly with the individual HEIs, and in contrast with the Netherlands, there is hardly any government support. This may be caused by the political organization, with education in the hands of the Flemish- and French-speaking communities. These governments do not take a clear leading role in the development of new educational policies towards excellence. However, culture change is set in motion within HEIs, and more programs may follow soon.

16.4.3 The German-Speaking Countries

In the German-speaking countries, culture towards excellence is ambivalent. It is also politically sensitive because references to very problematic historical events are easily made: both to the Nazi era, with its *Übermensch* ideas, and to the GDR, with its extensive doping-based talent development programs in sports. Such historical events have led to such sensitivity around the subject that, generally speaking, support measures have to remain at the individual level.

Throughout the German-speaking countries, individual talent support programs through private foundations are well accepted. There is a certain culture of excellence appreciation, but this is not institutionalized very strongly in the development of programs for groups of talents at HEIs.

However, this culture is also changing. In recent years, focus on excellence has also been given a significant boost because of the successful “Excellence Initiative” in German research. Talking about excellence has become more common and has also spread towards the education side of universities. This applies to both Germany and Austria. Specifically for Germany, the leading role of foundations supporting talents is strongly embedded in the culture, leading to a very specific set of actors around the concept of excellence. In Austria, the role of foundations is also important, but not as strong. Here, it is worth noting that a certain role for the private sector in honors education seems acceptable within the culture. In addition, the general climate towards excellence seems positive, with the national foundation ÖZBF playing an important role.

In Switzerland, developments are slightly different. The sensitivity around the concept of excellence is not felt as strong. Talent development programs are well accepted in compulsory education.

Interestingly, this does not necessarily spread to the higher education sector. There are no HEIs with honors programs yet.

16.4.4 *Countries Compared*

Overall, we can conclude that while there are significant differences between the countries, the ideological trend is towards less egalitarianism and more focus on excellence. These two trends are related, but they do not form the two sides of the same coin. The move away from the egalitarian philosophy is accompanied by a move towards an equal opportunity philosophy. In this philosophy, there is more room for the individual needs of students and therefore also for talent development.

The increased focus on excellence at the national level can thus be seen as one of the consequences of the move towards an equal opportunity philosophy. At the same time, there are more developments that can explain the increased focus on excellence. For example, this has often been linked to developments at the supranational level, such as globalization and the need to distinguish oneself in an increasingly open labor market. This has led political parties with different ideologies to realize that many talent development measures are in fact – in the words of Danish talent development expert Stefan Hermann – “generally speaking good things to do if you want to improve the quality of education.”

It is tempting to conclude that the process of slow culture change and the accompanying development of honors programs in the Netherlands from the early 1990s is a blueprint for the other countries in this book. Some developments suggest it is true. For example, in Denmark, the first development of honors education started around a decade later than in the Netherlands, and Denmark now seems to be where the Netherlands was a decade ago. Other Nordic countries are a number of years “behind” Denmark in this respect. However, the situation is not that simple. Institutional factors (discussed below) are also relevant, and development is also very dependent upon local culture, tradition, politics, and the attitude towards outside influences. Development also depends on the specific local relationship between research and education within HEIs. Moreover, honors education was also “used” in the Netherlands to change the culture towards appreciation of outstanding performances and excellence within higher education.

In general, focus on excellence might also be related to the political coalition in power: roughly speaking, social-democratic politicians are more likely to focus on equality and less likely to approve of measures to promote excellence or elite programs. This is not always the case however, as in the Netherlands, the Sirius Programme was introduced under a social-democratic Minister of Education.⁵ Countries differ with respect to how politicians act and how stable their views of excellence and support for accompanying programs are. Honors programs can reach stability once their existence is welcomed by most or all major political parties and they have taken a stable place in the educational structures of a country.

This brings us to the institutional factors influencing the development of honors programs.

⁵ Minister Ronald Plasterk (PvdA, social-democrats) awarded the first Sirius subsidies in 2009.

16.5 Institutional Factors

The level of differentiation in primary and secondary education, the selectiveness of higher education in general, and admission requirements in particular are all relevant factors for the development of honors programs. But there is no simple relationship between these institutional factors and the development of programs. We already showed this in Chap. 15, when we discussed the differences in university admission and the selectiveness of the education system in general in relation to the development of honors programs. The discussion of three examples of simple – seemingly logical – statements will further illustrate this.

1. Countries with an educational structure where differentiation is common might be more inclined towards the development of honors programs. Do countries with early differentiation between children in secondary school have more honors programs than countries with a single-structure compulsory education system? Not necessarily so: there are many programs in the Netherlands (with early differentiation), but also quite a few in Denmark (with single structure). And in Switzerland (early differentiation), there are none.
2. Growth in student numbers makes the student population more heterogeneous and might be one incentive for the increasingly felt need among HEIs to sort out the most talented and motivated students for honors programs. Do countries that experience quick growth in the number of students in higher education develop more programs? Not clearly so. The Netherlands and Austria are two countries with high increase in tertiary education participation (over 40 % in the last decade). Indeed, these countries both have programs. But in Finland, where student numbers have hardly grown (although applications have gone up) and thus university entry has become even more selective, some programs have also developed. And in Iceland, Switzerland, and Luxembourg, with high growth percentages, there are no programs.
3. A strict selection for a regular study program could decrease the “need” for an honors program, as – put bluntly – the elite has already been selected. If anything, evidence suggests the opposite. In Denmark, the admission requirement for a B.Sc. in International Business at Copenhagen Business School is extremely high (GPA of 11.9, where 12 is the maximum). But at this particular study program, two honors programs have been developed specifically to further sort out “the best of the best.” The same is true for the Center of Excellence program at the WU in Vienna (Austria). For the general master program, the best students are selected. Then the best of those are selected for the honors program. The Finnish university system poses most restrictions to university entry among the 11 countries studied. Here, being in a university might be seen as “sufficiently selective.” While development of honors programs is indeed very limited in Finland, there are some programs available.

These examples show that the relationship between the organization of the education system in general and the development of honors education is complicated.

However, these institutional factors do set the margins within which honors education can develop. Besides, there are also other institutional factors that can have a direct or indirect influence on talent development in general and honors education in particular. We discuss four factors in more detail: progression in education, recruitment, economy, and politics.

16.5.1 Progression in Education

The need to develop honors programs might also be related to the national system of progression in education. We have seen that in the countries where the progression rate of bachelor graduates into master programs is highest (Denmark, Austria), the development of honors programs is also strong in recent years. Further research into a possible relationship between these two facts could be very valuable. One possible explanation could be that in countries where continuing into a master program is “normal,” the bachelor program might be a bit more general and less focused. Honors programs could then fill the “gap” that exists for students who want to deepen their knowledge. Possibly, students also feel more need to distinguish themselves.

We have found honors programs in both the bachelor and master phases of education. In the Dutch experience, the first programs were developed in the bachelor phase, later followed by the master phase. Other countries have different experiences. In Denmark, government support facilitated the development of elite master programs, before bachelor programs were present. In the German Excellence Network of Bavaria, programs for groups of students are focused on the master phase. The first Austrian honors program, the Center of Excellence at WU Wien, is also for the master phase. However, most other programs are for bachelor students. The picture is thus varied and calls for more research. What are the differences in aims and content of programs in the bachelor and the master, and why are they developed first at a certain level in a specific national context?

Another interesting research topic would be the possible relationship between the average age of students at HEIs and the development of honors education. In some Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland), students traditionally enter higher education at a relatively high age. They have more “life experience” before they start their studies, and this may influence their choice to enter honors education.

16.5.2 Recruitment

Both the system of university recruitment and the relevant scale of recruitment seem relevant for the development of honors programs. Some study programs have a clear international focus, are conducted in English, and explicitly recruit students internationally. In such internationally oriented programs, development of honors programs might be more likely. For example, in international business studies, a kind

of international honors network has been set up in the CEMS-MIM program. More research into such programs could shed valuable light on the different scales of recruitment that can be relevant for honors education.

At the national level, funding of education institutions is based on student numbers, which means there is an incentive to attract more students. Such competition can be an incentive to develop honors programs. HEIs can distinguish themselves by offering an honors program and some institutions explicitly name this as a reason for doing so. On the other hand, most Nordic countries have a national system coordinating the admission of students to higher education. Students can apply for the program of their choice, but, for example, in Norway, they can also be placed at other universities. This high level of national coordination and limited number of student seats implies less competition between institutions.

Some programs are also explicitly set up with a focus on recruitment for an academic career: participants are obvious candidates to become Ph.D. students. This is especially strong in Germany, where a number of programs in the Elite Network of Bavaria explicitly mention these intentions. In the Netherlands, the picture is varied between HEIs. Some honors programs explicitly focus on research, but in many universities, there are also (regular) research master programs to identify future Ph.D. students. In some of these cases, the corresponding “non-research” master programs have an honors program in place to offer the most talented students extra opportunities. Often these programs are focused on leadership.

Apart from the recruitment process of the HEI in general, there is also the recruitment process of the honors program in particular. Many different selection methods are used here. Often, grades play a certain role, but motivation is also included in many admission schemes, in the form of motivation letters and/or interviews. Sometimes other factors such as commitment or community service are also taken into account, and a lot of programs include a possibility of “self-selection”: motivated students who are not invited to the program can still apply. These procedures are often well considered, intensive, and intricate. Labor-intensive admission schemes can come under pressure in times of budget cuts, which leads to a risk of selection based just on grades.

16.5.3 Economy, Business, and Financing

Economic developments in general and labor market conditions in particular also influence the development of honors programs by HEIs. In addition, they influence the choices that students make. The link between the labor market and HEIs is strong in the German-speaking countries. This also shows in honors programs: different HEIs have developed programs that explicitly focus on the careers of the students involved.

However, HEIs are not the only institutions focusing on talent development for economic reasons. Private foundations and companies and also students themselves increasingly take their own initiatives. Three striking examples are the StipendiumPlus association in Germany, uniting 12 foundations offering financial

and other support to talented students; the Videncenter in Denmark, a building financed by a private investor, where talent development programs are coordinated and talented students can be received; and the sponsors who have a prominent place in Austrian programs, such as WU Top League and Center of Excellence. In addition, students from Germany and Austria have set up their own online “talent networks” or have become members of networks sponsored by private companies.

The growth in student numbers in recent years, especially in countries like Austria and the Netherlands, also has implications for the labor market. Competition is fiercer, and in these circumstances, it is very important for students to show something extra on their CV. One way of doing so is by participating in an honors program.

Private companies see the need to recruit the most talented students in an early stage of their career. This process has been called the “war for talent” in the early 2000s. While there is less reference to “war” since the economic crisis broke out, many companies still see the need to put a lot of effort in talent recruitment. Actual participation of companies in education (including honors education) is subject of debate. Some people want to protect the education process from commercial influences, while others stress the added value of business involvement in preparing students for “real-world” careers. We have seen that discussions around this issue are especially fierce in Sweden, where “free schools” run by companies have come under fire in the media and politics after some cases of bankruptcy of schools. In Austria, there are examples of programs with explicit business involvement, also in the content of honors education. Especially in the current context of government budgets under pressure, we expect that more HEIs will start to look to the private sector if they want to set up an honors program.

The cost of the development of honors education, in relation to its added value, is of course also very relevant for HEIs. Added value can be defined in different ways. We have not included this monetary factor in this project but recommend to investigate it further in a more in-depth research.

Another important factor related to finance is the financial cost and/or support for excellent students in honors programs. Here, we see different countries taking different directions. In Germany and Austria, there are very low tuition fees, and in addition, special grants and stipends are available to talented students. Particularly in Germany, these can be substantial amounts of money, enabling students to concentrate on their (honors) education. A contrasting situation is found in the Netherlands, where the government has launched a plan to ask a double tuition fee for honors education (compared to regular education) in a situation where regular tuition fees amount to almost 2,000 euros per year. The effect of financial measures on student’s willingness to participate in honors programs is unclear.

16.5.4 Politics

We have discussed political views above in our review of ideological factors, but there is more to politics. The political organization of the education system is also very relevant for the development of honors programs.

One example showing this relevance is the question “where” in politics the issue of talent development in higher education is put. A strategy for talent development can be part of general education policy, part of special or special needs education policy, or a separate education policy area in itself. It can also become part of another, noneducational policy area, for example, equal opportunity, anti-discrimination, or emancipation. The “location” of a policy issue is often related to financial questions. For example, the Dutch Deputy Minister of Education recently wrote a letter clearly situating talent development in primary and secondary education as part of “special education” policy (Rijksoverheid 2014). From now on, this is therefore also the policy area where financing for these programs must be sought.

The organization of the political system can also influence the possibilities of developing a coherent view on talent development throughout the education system. For example, countries differ with regard to which ministry is responsible for higher education. In some countries, one ministry is responsible for the complete education system (the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland), while in others, higher education is governed in a separate ministry, often combined with research (Denmark, Austria, Luxembourg). In federal countries, the situation is often even more complicated. Powers are concentrated at the levels of individual states, cantons, or communities, and there is little (Germany, Switzerland) or no (Belgium) national coordination. We have seen that in Austria, there is an extensive infrastructure around gifted education in primary and secondary education, but development of honors programs in higher education is just starting. In federal Germany, we see huge differences between the Länder, with Bavaria having the clearest focus on excellence. In Belgium, HEIs are taking initiatives themselves as little is done by the different governments.

Organizational changes can occur due to political developments. Sometimes there is a sudden change of ministers or even of ministries: in Austria, the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture suddenly became the “Ministry of Education and Women’s Affairs” in late 2013. Political developments or changing governments can also lead to sudden policy change. This was, for example, the case in Denmark, where the financing of Elite Mater programs stopped after a government change. In Norway, the recently installed new government decided to focus explicitly on quality and promised new policy on provisions for gifted children.

16.5.5 Selection and Flexibility

We conclude this review of institutional factors with a seemingly obvious statement: you get what you select for. We have seen that in all countries, there is a moment of selection in the education process. Children are streamed according to academic ability. Often this is based on grades. The ways in which pupils are graded vary but are often based on tests that benefit students who are good at reproducing information and analyzing within the framework set by their teacher. The most creative

minds do not necessarily score well. They need flexibility to fully explore their creativity. Honors programs can offer them the challenges they need. Often this does indeed happen, but the specific institutionalization of the education system in a national context can also leave little room for this creativity and flexibility. It is then up to creative HEIs and individuals to find the room they need and attract the “right” students, according to the mission of the honors program.

16.6 Concluding Remarks

For the first time, an overview of honors education in northern Europe has been presented. We have found many interesting, striking, and unexpected results. The ten results the research team found most striking are summarized in Box 16.2.

Generally speaking, the results from this book can be of interest for politicians and policy makers, as honors education appears to be a good outlet for talent. In addition, (honors) students looking for comparable honors courses around Europe to obtain an international experience get insight in the opportunities at various institutions.

However, this first overview also demonstrates that we are only at the beginning of an important silent revolution towards excellence. It is obvious that there are many things we still don’t know. Therefore, we offer some alternative perspectives and do some suggestions for further research in the next, final, chapter.

Box 16.2: Ten Most Striking Findings

1. *The focus on talent development.* This has become a priority in many countries and a lot of honors programs now exist in the 11 countries studied in this book. However, political volatility can still be high. A “momentum” can suddenly arise but can also quickly disappear.
2. *The surprising directions programs can take.* Programs can develop in unexpected settings and directions: examples range from a unique inter-university approach in Belgium and students running their own program in Denmark to the strong regional focus on excellence in Bavaria.
3. *The strength of private sector involvement.* Many foundations and companies support talent development. Often, they explicitly connect the program to the labor market.
4. *The focus on community building.* Informal gatherings of honors students and teachers have great added value. The importance of “community” is recognized in many programs, but focus remains within the program or HEI and its surroundings.

(continued)

Box 16.2 (continued)

5. *The lack of framework.* While there is community building within programs, there is little networking between programs. There is no international network, and the Netherlands is the only country with a national framework of HEIs offering honors programs (the Sirius Programme).
6. *The importance of culture.* Cultural ideas about excellence can be very strong. In the Nordic countries, the “Law of Jante” is effectively a cultural imperative forbidding people to stand out from the crowd. Changing a culture is a slow process.
7. *The focus on primary and secondary education.* In many countries, talent development is now focused on compulsory education, but of course, it does not stop at age 18. Interesting examples of programs linking secondary and higher education could prove inspirational.
8. *The difficulties of terminology.* A myriad of terms is possible to refer to the people and programs in this book. Terminology is often politically charged and scientists do not agree either. Discussion about terminology distracts from what honors education is really about. Practically, it can also make networking difficult and make programs hard to find for students.
9. *Successful examples paving the way.* To initiate an honors program, great obstacles need to be overcome. Successful examples offer both inspiration and possibilities to attract support. The efforts of pioneering individuals are crucial for program development.
10. *The need for flexibility.* In talent development, flexibility is a basic need. Teachers and students need freedom to design their own program. This gives room to their creativity, but it also prepares students for “the real world,” which awaits them after they finish their studies.

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⁶**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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