

Chapter 17

Breaking the Academic Lock Step

It should not be forgotten that one of the purposes of democracy is to provide each individual with the opportunity that is best for him (...) The ideal for democratic education good enough to meet the needs of the post-war world must not be security but excellence. (Aydelotte 1944)

These words were written by American honors education pioneer Frank Aydelotte in his 1944 book *Breaking the Academic Lock Step*. He explicitly links excellence to democracy, as this gives men “freedom to be individuals.” Aydelotte developed his own honors program at Swarthmore College and then helped establish honors programs on about 100 campuses (see Wolfensberger 2012, p. 13).

The views of Aydelotte have now also reached northern Europe. In the last two decades, talent development in higher education has been set in motion here. Many interesting initiatives are now being taken in the Benelux, Nordic and German-speaking countries. This opens up fascinating new opportunities for students, educators, and policy makers, but it also poses challenges. In this short final chapter, we share our final thoughts and propose some directions for further research. First, we argue why in our view the promotion of excellence is valuable.

17.1 The Value of Promotion of Excellence

The European countries studied in this book all have an egalitarian tradition to some extent. Providing extra opportunities to talented students is not obvious in such a climate. However, promotion of excellence in education is valuable for many reasons. It has benefits for all parties involved: higher education institutions, policy makers, teaching staff, the participating students themselves, and even the country as a whole.

All countries have felt the impact of globalization over the last decades. This has many consequences. Countries feel the need to distinguish themselves and focus on areas in which they excel, in order to be strong in international competition.

Having a well-educated population in general, and in these areas in particular, is very important. The importance of evoking excellence in higher education for the market and knowledge economy is stressed by politicians and government advisory bodies. Talent development programs fit well into this picture.

Focusing on higher education, there is an increasing international orientation in HEIs. This often starts from the research side, which in many fields operates in a globally competitive environment. This international focus also spreads to the recruitment side: many HEIs attract students at the international level, offering study programs with international appeal. This already implies a focus on excellence in order to stand out from the crowd. But there are more benefits for HEIs in linking the focus on excellence in research to excellence in education. It provides opportunities to educate the next generation of excellent researchers, to use their ideas to remain at the top, and to attract the generation coming afterwards to come to this HEI. Fortunately, honors education reaches further than research-oriented programs. HEIs can design honors to educate their students in such a way that they can become excellent professionals. Conceptions of honors education then include persistence, ethical judgments, leaving a legacy, and risk-taking.

However, the conversation about the importance of equal access to honors programs for students from various social and economic contexts and different ethничal backgrounds is just starting. Questions of effects of elitism and spending energy and money on the lucky few are important to raise. Expanding the horizon of students and teachers is important to all parties involved.

This brings us to the “why” of honors education and the purpose of talent development, especially in higher education. Depending on the mission of each honors program, different answers may be given. One could say that every student needs education that meets his or her needs every day. Also the talented and motivated students that are able and willing to do more than the regular program can offer should get education that brings them a step further in their academic, professional, and personal development. It is also in the national interest to have a well-functioning education system. From our overview, it has become clear that in all countries, there is differentiation in the education system at some point. Recruitment of students for arts and sports programs is very selective, and this is well accepted everywhere. It makes sense to organize the differentiation in the wider education system as well as possible, and base it on proven methods. Excellence programs may serve as a laboratory in this respect. Honors education asks for honors pedagogies and specific teacher approach. Faculty development for honors is getting increasingly important. Honors as laboratory of innovation with changeovers to regular education point out the possible positive effects of this kind of selective education for a whole institution. The efforts towards improvement in programming to promote excellence may enhance all curricula.

There are more benefits from having such laboratories of innovation in the form of honors programs. In many countries, there are heavy discussions about private sector involvement in education. This is of course partly an ethical discussion, but honors programs can offer input in this discussion by their practical examples of such involvement.

Honors programs can prepare students to become “citizens of the world,” socially engaged people willing to contribute to the solution of global issues. In our diverse and networked world, it becomes more important to teach students that they can become tomorrow’s global leaders. Developing the academic as well as intercultural competences and moral sensitivity of students becomes essential. Talented students with their above-average abilities and motivation can contribute to solutions for worldwide problems we face today, like climate change, terrorism, or contagious illnesses. International exchange regarding honors can improve education in intercultural skills, inquiry methods, and the engagement in learning endeavor.

Many companies have an interest in recruiting the best students. Many governments have strategies focusing on top sectors. Many institutions want to invest in talent. In this situation, there are opportunities for cooperation. Talent development programs seem a logical choice.

One problem in this respect is that there is still little research available about the results of honors programs for all involved. In fact, there is a lack of research about talent development programs in higher education in general. Questions on why, who, how, and how well around talent development and honors will improve the educational endeavor. In the next sections, we propose some possible approaches on this issue and identify a number of perspectives and urgent research questions.

17.2 A Long-Term View

First, we propose to use a long-term approach to analyze the development of honors programs. As this is a first overview, there is no comparative research available for the development of honors programs in higher education in Europe. Only for the Netherlands such research is available, for example, in Van Eijl et al. (2004, 2005). However, there are some data about gifted education that may explain something about the institutional context in which development takes place. In the year 2000, Persson et al. gathered data about the development of legislation and special schools or classes in compulsory education (p. 725). Results are presented and compared to the 2014 situation in Table 17.1.

From this table, it becomes clear that there are more provisions for talented and gifted students in 2014 than there were in 2000. Special legislation about gifted and talented students has been introduced throughout Germany, Denmark, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Special schools and/or classes are now in place in Denmark and Finland. On the contrary, in Norway, it is still difficult to have any formal differentiation. The Netherlands has also seen legislation introduced and combines this with the highest development of honors programs.

For all the programs in this book, we tried to establish the starting date. In the Netherlands, around 12 programs were already developed in 2000 (see Van Eijl et al. 2004 for an overview). From the other countries, there are only two examples of programs that started before the year 2000: the Center of Excellence program at WU Vienna (Austria) and the Bachelor in International Business Administration

Table 17.1 Provisions for talented and gifted students in compulsory education per country^a, development 2000–2014

Country ^a	Legislation, 2000 ^b	Legislation, 2014	Special schools or classes, 2000 ^b	Special schools or classes, 2014	Development of honors programs in higher education, 2014
Austria	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Belgium	No	Mixed	Yes	Yes	Medium
Denmark	No	Yes	No	Yes	Medium
Finland	No	No	No	Yes	Low
Germany	Few states	Yes	Yes	Yes	Medium
Netherlands	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Norway	No	No	No	No	None
Sweden	No	No	Experimental	Experimental	None
Switzerland	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	None

^aIceland and Luxembourg were not in the 2000 survey and are therefore excluded here

^bSource 2000 data: Persson et al. (2000, p. 725)

program at WHU Otto Beisheim School of Management (Germany). Of course there may have been other programs in 2000 that have since disappeared, but development was certainly very limited. We hope that in the future, this book can be of use to make comparisons about the development of honors education and the changes in climate towards excellence and talent development in higher education.

In addition, we hope that similar explorative research will be carried out in other countries throughout Europe, completing the picture of honors education in at least all European countries. However, we think a global view will be of real interest as well. More insight in honors didactics and honors programs in, for example, Asia, Arab countries, Australia, or Latin America can be inspiring for all the parties involved.

17.3 Other Perspectives

We started this book by developing our own working definition of an honors program: *Honors programs are selective study programs linked to higher education institutions. They are designed for motivated and gifted students who want to do more than the regular program offers. These programs have clear admission criteria and clear goals and offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than regular programs.*

The choice to use this definition has had a number of implications, as it shaped our perspective on the programs. In general this definition worked out well. Interviewees from different countries could work with this definition and could

point out various programs offered at their institutions, even though a common language is still lacking. However, it should be mentioned that the descriptions of clear goals is often lacking. Connections between mission statement, performance indicators, assessments, and selection are important and are not yet strongly developed. Research on those connections could evoke excellence among the honors programs. In this section, we discuss some alternative avenues that could be taken in research projects.

17.3.1 Students and Teachers

Our approach has focused mostly on institutions. This shows in the definition: we focus on *selective study programs linked to higher education institutions*. This implicates that we have focused on what HEIs do and what they offer: the “supply side” of honors education. However, it is also possible to start research from a different angle: what possibilities are present for individual talented students? This would also change the perspective on what governments and HEIs do and what instruments they use.

A focus on a student point of view leads to different questions. What do students themselves consider “honors”? And what do they see as part of talent development? Another important question is: what are the reasons for students to join honors education? We have touched upon this subject, but mostly in relation to economic factors and the need for students to stand out from the crowd. However, students also have more ideological or practical reasons to join a program. Also, do they see themselves as participants or as cocreators of a program? More detailed research among students could yield valuable insights in these questions. Also, it would be valuable to investigate the effects of honors teaching on students’ outcome and on their working lives as (excellent) professional, their perceived well-being, and mindset. Research on honors alumni should then be included.

A student-based approach would also place more focus on grant programs and the possibilities they present for excellent students. In addition, more would be said about the possibilities for individual students to start studying at prestigious HEIs in other countries as a way to challenge themselves and fully explore their potential.

One element that could also be researched from this approach is the role of student associations within honors programs. This is starting to develop in the Netherlands in recent years. Of course, this has implications for community building.

In short, we think a student-based approach would be a very helpful change of perspective.

In addition, we also think more focus should be placed on the role of teachers in honors education. The role of teachers is pivotal; however, faculty development for honors is in its initial phase. Also teacher education should include courses on honors education. This study gave insights that, especially in the German-speaking countries, master programs for gifted education were developed. However, honors educators may need a broader perspective.

17.3.2 A Broader Vision on Talent

In this research project, we have paid little attention to the definition of talent and we have largely ignored sports and arts (including music) education programs.

The definition of talent involves a choice laden with moral, political, and scientific arguments and is also very dependent upon the local context. We are aware of this, but we think that at this point, it was necessary to limit our study to description of talent development as found and focus on our exploration of honors programs throughout the countries. We have made inventories of admission procedures used by HEIs in different countries and for specific honors programs. Often, these selection and admission procedures are based on a limited view on talent, for example, only focusing on cognition and expressed in grades. More research into talent development in arts, music, design, and sports programs could lead to interesting new insights into teaching strategies fostering talent and its relationship to creativity and citizenship. New insights on how to challenge students and to evoke excellence could also be reached by delving deeper into the details of existing honors programs: what are the exact visions and missions that underlie these programs? How are those programs improving students' cognitive capacity while strengthening their interpersonal and intrapersonality abilities? Looking in more detail at honors education may give insight in the ways deeper, more meaningful, and transformative learning experiences are reached for gifted and motivated students. What is the climate towards excellence within the HEIs? But also: what are the experiences of students in the honors programs; in what way are their talents better recognized and/or developed? What are the perceptions of the working field receiving these students? Those perspectives could be of great use to people interested in the development of their own honors program.

17.4 Future Developments and Research

We hope we have already made clear that we think this research project practically screams for follow-ups: more insights are necessary and therefore more research is needed.

The most basic recommendations for further research follow from the paragraphs above. First, it is necessary to broaden views by including other countries in Europe or indeed the world in a research project. Second, we recommend to use various perspectives by including students and educators in the research. This can both provide a full overview of possibilities for talented students internationally and broaden opportunities for sharing knowledge among HEIs and policy makers.

Apart from this, we think that our findings within the 11 countries in this book have provided many possible starting points for new research projects. To inspire such further research, we have made a list of 12 possible central questions for follow-up projects. This can be found in Box 17.1. Of course, many more questions can be formulated.

Box 17.1: Possible Central Questions for Further Research

1. What are the goals of honors education and how do these relate to the official aims of regular education in different countries?
2. What teaching strategies are chosen for honors programs, why are they chosen, and how and why do they differ from regular education?
3. How are educational strategies in honors education evaluated and subsequently transferred to regular education?
4. What is the added value of honors education (measured in different ways)?
5. Who are the key persons and what are the key events or publications facilitating the diffusion of honors education between and within countries?
6. What is the result of honors education for organizing HEIs: do they attract or retain better students, teachers, and researchers? Does it influence the level of education at the HEI in general?
7. What do students ask for and need in honors education and why?
8. What is the added value of network formation within an honors program (community formation) and between different honors programs?
9. What are the results of private sector involvement in honors programs, both in content and output?
10. What is the long-term impact of community building within and between honors programs for both the programs in general and their (former) participants?
11. What is the relation between the national tradition of progression in education and the development of special provisions for talented students?
12. At what level (regional, national, international) do honors programs operate and how does this relate to its area for recruitment?

As the list shows, we think an important focus point for future research is the theme of networks within and around honors education. This network approach has several dimensions.

First is the institutional dimension. While in our definition honors education is connected to HEIs, we have seen some examples of initiatives that are not or only loosely tied to universities. Also, we have seen international programs, such as CEMS-MIM. Within HEIs, we see some signs of a link between the level of specialization and the development of honors education. In both Denmark and Austria, most honors programs are found at specialized universities, either technical or economical: the Copenhagen Business School and Vienna University of Economics and Business on the one hand and the Technical University of Denmark and the Technical University of Vienna on the other hand. It would be very valuable to discover trends in this institutionalization of talent development.

A second and related dimension is the contextual dimension. To what elements in the wider context are honors programs linked? We see roles of the private sector and of politics. Focused research on private sector involvement could shed more light on its consequences for both the contents of honors programs and the labor market position of honors program graduates. Further research among politicians could shed light on the question why the subject of excellence is politically contested in some countries and less in others.

Thirdly, we see the community dimension. This is an important element in many programs. In Austria, students form year-groups, while in the Netherlands, honors communities are set up with both online and “real-world” locations. In Finland, examples are from secondary school but still very relevant: students involved in activities such as Päivölä boarding school and the Millennium Youth Camp often become friends for life. The long-term impact of “honors community building” is not yet known, but this could provide another powerful argument for the development of honors programs.

All the dimensions above can also be expressed in the setup of programs and their mission statements. More detailed research into these statements and the elements expressed in them will also give greater insight in the motives behind the development of honors education.

Finally, there is the practical dimension. The more we know about networks, the more the experiences can be of use to others. The American and Dutch experiences with the NCHC and the Sirius Programme could serve as examples for other countries wishing to establish a framework around honors education. Further research comparing student-run programs to HEI-organized programs could also be very valuable.

As Danish talent coordinator Lene Krøl Andersen puts it: “I think talent development is all about making it on your own. In the old days we pointed at the students and they got it all served. I believe that was completely wrong. They have to create their own careers and fight for it.”

In the end, staff and students make honors education together. Hopefully, this insight inspires students to seek cooperation and exchange with honors programs abroad and (further) develop their own programs.

17.5 Concluding Remarks

Since the introduction of the first honors programs in the Benelux, Nordic and German-speaking countries, a lot of lessons have been learned. Many of the programs have gone through major changes before they found their current form and will keep on changing, continuously adapting new knowledge and new challenges. Luckily, the people involved in honors education are usually very willing to share

their knowledge and learn from each other. This constructive attitude can be beneficial for people thinking of developing their own honors program. Researchers can contribute to this by describing both successful good practices and failures.

Here we also reach the last factor influencing the development of honors programs: individual efforts. Persons are needed who like pioneering and really want to put a lot of effort into their dream of having a successful program for talented students. Many examples of such persons have come up in this book: among others, the teacher setting up the honors programs in Niederlandistik in Oldenburg (Germany); the rectorate at the University of Freiburg, who supported the development of a Liberal Arts and Sciences program in a new University College; the researcher in Danish Roskilde intent on making the “language profiles” available as an honors program. The value of such people cannot be overestimated, and more research into their exact roles is very relevant.

The countries in this book all have egalitarian traditions. However, there are many signs that the culture is slowly changing towards more focus on excellence. We have identified the factors relevant to the development of honors programs: ideology, the institutionalization of the education system, the political and economic context, and individual efforts.

We have seen that not only governments and HEIs but also private foundations, companies, and students themselves are taking initiatives in honors education and networks. Talent development has gained a higher place on the agenda of policy makers and educators in many countries over the last decade. We are optimistic about the development of honors programs in the years to come.

Still, more can be done. Agreement on the use of common language to describe programs would certainly help. In addition, we have seen that international networks and national frameworks for honors education are mostly lacking. Focus in education for talented and motivated students is still on compulsory education in many countries. The setup of an international honors network in Europe could give a great boost to education for talented students.

Honors programs challenge talents to strive for the best. The honors students of today are likely to become the global leaders of tomorrow. It is crucial that honors education provides them with a chance to fully explore their talents. Directly and indirectly, society as a whole also profits from having excellent education available also for the best students. We hope this book helps to connect the people involved – and hopefully also new adapters – to continue to offer the best education for all students, including the ones who are able and willing to break the academic lock step.

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