

A submission to the inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities

Term of Reference: The adequacy of current research training schemes to support Australia's anticipated future requirements for tertiary-qualified professionals in a wide range of disciplines

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In this submission we question the arbitrary nature of research training commencing with enrolment in a Masters by Research or Doctoral degree. We suggest that giving consideration to Honours in undergraduate programs is integral to increasing the effectiveness of the current Research Training Scheme (RTS) in Australian universities. We argue that while Honours is uniquely positioned within undergraduate programs, it has escaped policy scrutiny necessary for that unique positioning to be fully exploited in the context of 21st century developments in research and research training fields. We consider that the situation of competing pressures for advanced vocational training and preliminary research training for doctoral research, especially in relation to universities generating their own research cohorts and the sort of funding that this generates for them, needs to be reconsidered in policy terms. We suggest that the assumption of a vibrant Honours program increasing the likelihood of cohorts of well trained researchers for timely, if not early, completions, and further providing a pool of possible future academics to staff university programs and high level industry placements. Used judiciously, Honours programs will form the basis of a dynamic research culture within a university, something which has been unquestioned since it was articulated as such in the 1957 Murray Report on Australian universities (Murray, 1957). To achieve this, we submit that current university practice in regard to Honours needs more systematic support from funding bodies.

We have examined Honours programs in universities across Australia and have found variations both in structure and expectation of research capacities developed in such programs. We have considered the consequences that this has for students who wish to undertake higher degrees by research after their undergraduate programs have been successfully completed. Our review of universities' Honours programs across rural, regional, and urban Australia has indicated that there is a degree of variation that is localised as far as each university is concerned, and that there is a lack of consistency in various universities' application of policies or procedures in the implementation of their Honours programs.

The conduct of Honours programs appears very much a given aspect of undergraduate programs, not having been singled out for attention by major organisations in the higher education field in recent years. Our review of the universities' statements on Honours programs indicates a tacit understanding of the place of Honours programs as a foundation for and a pathway to research within the university sector. The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC) publication, *Fourth Year Honours Programs: Guidelines for Good Practice*, no longer exists as a discrete document, and even so, this was a 1995 publication, based on the Guthrie Report of 1994. The

Guthrie Report is another document which is no longer available, so we cannot refer to its recommendations. Something (but not a great deal) of the importance of the Honours award can be gleaned from the figures generated from the *National Summary of Post Graduate Awards* (Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, 2002). Some information is available in the form of AVCC (2002) figures that show 12% increase of graduates going from Honours degrees to higher research degrees between 1992 and 2001, suggesting that the relevance of Honours in relation to research degrees is a salient consideration for the future of research training to support Australia's anticipated future requirements for tertiary-qualified professionals.

An increase in the take up of research degrees by Honours graduates suggests the such degrees are becoming a more attractive option for students. The point is that there is a rise in numbers of students taking up established Honours pathways to research degrees, compared with possibilities open to students via Masters degrees, for example. It is one point in possible pathways to higher research degrees where an undergraduate degree (a Bachelor with Honours) outranks a postgraduate degree (Masters). It is also one that, while it has important implications for research higher degrees, it is beyond the scope of any possible monitoring protocols by deans of graduate studies. One such dean interviewed acknowledged the implied link between Honours and the activities of his own research and graduate studies office, but also pointed out that any monitoring of Honours programs within his university occurred within faculty protocols and practices.

If we accept the importance of Honours as a significant pathway into higher research degrees, we might expect funding bodies not only to develop appropriate policy, but also to fund that pathway. However, the AVCC guidelines (Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, 2005) focusses on maintaining and monitoring academic quality and standards in higher degrees in Masters by Research, PhD degrees, and Professional Doctorates, stating that this document replaces the 1995 document, and referring to Honours only in relation to its subheading: *9 Support for students*, where it asserts, 'Universities should provide a learning environment appropriate to the reasonable needs and levels of the students (undergraduate, honours, postgraduate), according to the characteristics of their students'. These are the only two references to Honours in this document. At the same time, AVCC policy statements and guidelines (Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, 2004) tend to focus on copyright issues, rather than teaching and learning in any field. More recent bodies, such as Universities Australia, the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR) have not put Honours on any of their review of Higher Education agendas.

A discussion paper on the Bologna process (Department of Education Science and Training, 2006) refers to Honours only in relation to its last dot point of *Recommendation 3*, that DEST (which is now DEEWR) investigate 'the possible impact on four year bachelors, honours years, and one year masters in a current environment of variation based on perceived market advantage', and that this be in the context of 'the current Australian honours degree model (3+1)' as fitting into the

model. It concludes, 'Further discussion and debate is required about the role of honours, honours and Masters by research, and on research training pathways.' As the desired discussion does not appear to have been taking place, we attempt to frame some possible directions.

The Graduate Careers Council of Australia (2005) *Course Experience Questionnaire Tables* does not distinguish between graduates and those who graduated with Honours on any of its scales for the universities across Australia. At the same time, the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDoGS) have no information in relation to Honours programs, and there is no documentation to suggest that it has ever been discussed by them. This is understandable as Honours is an undergraduate program, but we would point out that since Honours or at least Honours Equivalence is the main entry point to postgraduate studies that they oversee, it would be reasonable for Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies to articulate a public stance on the issue. The DEEWR website appears to be content-free on the subject, as is the site for the Chairs of Academic Boards. There is a report conducted on behalf of the Australian Historical Association (Millar & Peel, 2005-6) which does report on the numbers of Honours students in History at Australian Universities, but this is too specialised an area to be of much value in generalisations as to Honours Programs across universities in the country. A compilation of DEST data sets in relation to enrolments in Honours programs in Australian Universities in 2005 (Kleeman, 2007) shows that there is a concentration of numbers in the larger urban centres, not in rural and regional universities.

The local variations indicate the need for national guidelines and policy, backed with appropriate funding programs, to ensure a measure of consistent outcomes of Honours programs in relation to national awards (particularly as these apply to ranking for scholarships). It is possible to learn from a comparison of Honours outcomes with Masters outcomes. A student wanting to take up higher degree research study needs Honours or some sort of equivalent, and in the latter case, a strong argument for equivalence, especially when it comes to applications for scholarships. In Masters by Coursework and Masters by Research degrees there are clear indications of percentages of research components undertaken by students. A Masters by Coursework, for example, will usually serve as an argument for Honours Equivalence, given a general principle of the inclusion of a 25% research component. No such transparency is evident across the universities studied in relation to their Honours programs. The consequence of this is that the universities' research higher degrees programs are more than likely geared to graduates from their own Honours programs, but APAs and APAIs are national awards, which means that graduates who transfer to different universities in pursuit of such awards may encounter a measure of variation in expectations in relation to research skills training that may or may not be well founded.

As a pathway into higher research degrees, Honours is claimed by universities to provide an opportunity first of all to approximate the research behaviours of those who have led the field in research activities, learning the protocols involved, coming to the understanding that, like Einstein, the Honours student stands on the shoulders of giants. Second of all, Honours enables a research student to make an authentic contribution to the world's store of knowledge by virtue of their engagement with

authentic research activities. These are tacit understandings of the sort that Murray (1957) took up in his discussion of Honours in Australian universities. They are tacit understandings that we argue need to be foregrounded and reviewed in current RTS contexts that are so much a part of 21st Century research activities in Australian universities.

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) has completed its first wave of reviews of all Australian university programs, and has been similarly silent on the issue of Honours. As it has already embarked on its second wave of reviews it is possible that it could have included Honours programs as part of its brief, but there has been no indication that this might be the case. If universities value research, as they are required to do as part of their activities and the funding bodies that support their activities, they cannot with any sort of justification focus only on the vocational aspects that may constitute practical features of Honours programs. By vocational aspects we mean the practical competencies associated with particular careers or professions being emphasised over skills associated with enquiry and scholarship. The research components of Honours programs need transparent and public address. We suggest that none of this is possible in the sort of climate of policy drought that we have outlined above. It is a question that appears not to have been considered in the policy or funding domain.

We suggest that there is also a need for the development of policy that ensures a level of consistency in relation to universities' Honours programs. Policy, after all, drives behaviour, as it frames issues and priorities, including or indeed excluding the various economic, social and political factors which lead to an issue being placed on policy agenda (Taylir, Rizvi et al, p. 48). Murray's (1957) statement is in effect the only articulation of policy for Honours programs in Australian universities, made in 1957 when the world was different from the one Honours students and their supervisors have to negotiate today.

What has changed since then is reflected in such government policies as embodied in the Higher Education Support Act (HESA) and the RTS. Neither of these reflects on the position of Honours embedded in undergraduate programs or as part of pathways into higher research degrees. That is, there is the complication of Honours being an undergraduate program funded under HESA, and therefore treated like any other year in an undergraduate program as far as policy is concerned, while it holds a privileged place in relation to transition to research degrees and attendant considerations under RTS. We are suggesting Honours programs need to be revisited in light of significant economic, social and political change, and the rapidity of that change, as the second half of the 20th Century and the early years of the 21st Century have progressed.

Today, we have the context of RTS and attendant requirements for timely completions of higher research degrees tied to funding, and so on. What emerges is a philosophical tension between what has become a traditional pathway to a PhD and the need for some sort of a fourth year to prepare graduates for the more demanding segments of employment niches. The very nature of these two purposes raises issues of pedagogy as well as policy, even in relation to partial coursework and theses that Masters by Coursework and Professional Doctorates imply. It is a difficult position to

maintain as far as policy is concerned. Honours funding under HESA and its content under RTS makes it a hybrid case.

We submit that policy making in relation to Honours invites an intellectual rather than an empathetic or economic response. There is so little data available on the various Honours programs that all universities in Australia offer that it is not possible to generalise, or make valid comparisons: there has been no benchmarking of Honours regardless of the current assumptions around research, the nature of research, research training, or even what makes a university. Yet there seems to be a general recognition that an Honours program is part of that makeup. A case may be made for a national review of Honours programs in Australia. There is a number of national bodies which would be well placed to carry out such a review; one such body is AQUA, as part of its activities and its focus on quality.

Another of the issues is the current focus on vocational skills training, highlighted by the 2007 Australian federal election campaign and its outcome. With the swearing in of the new Labor Government we see a change in name for the department responsible for Higher Education providers, from DEST to DEEWR, and for research from DEST to DIISR. While these name changes may be understood to reflect the interests of the ministers responsible for those department, the former (DEEWR), the funding body for university programs, reflects an emphasis on workplace skills. Honours graduates may or may not want to go on to pursue a research program; they may wish to take advanced skills into the workplace they have chosen as part of their own career paths. This raises the question of just what these advanced skills may be: vocational skills, critical thinking skills, analytical skills, and so on. Honours has a dual purpose, and it is not within the scope of this submission to argue the benefits or disadvantages of Honours as part of vocational training. We do argue for consistency across the Honours field in relation to the gradings awarded to various Honours graduates, and ways in which they may be compared with each other. We argue that, at the very least, the H1 benchmark needs to be scrutinised for implications for policy and administrative behaviour, given the implications for the awarding of APAs and APAIs.

In this submission we do not question the role that Honours may play within a university and its research culture. We consider the lack of consistency and transparency as they pertain to research components understood to be features of Honours degrees. Further, we consider the implications that this has for the awarding of places and scholarships in research higher degrees. We submit that the Review Panel consider:

- a national review of Honours programs offered in Australian universities, with a focus on their implications for research and industry in the 21st century;
- the development of Honours policy emerging from the outcomes of that review;
- research in higher education funding bodies allocating funds for the provision of a research component in the Honours program;

- such Honours programs being incorporated into current RTS frameworks for universities' research programs;
- incorporating these programs into Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies areas of responsibility rather than having them as the sole responsibility of Heads of Faculties and Schools
- research funding to universities' Honours programs being contingent on research components in Honours programs being not less than 25%;
- universities who elect to incorporate the 25% minimum research component Honours programs continuing to be funded at the rate of normal undergraduate program delivery plus incentive top up from extra allocated research funds
- universities who elect to maintain Honours programs that do not have a minimum of 25% research component not receiving research funding for those Honours programs, but that they be funded as normal undergraduate programs.

We submit that consideration of what we have proposed will achieve some measure of success in improving current research training schemes to support Australia's anticipated future requirements for tertiary-qualified professionals in a wide range of disciplines.

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