Honours Programmes,
Sources of Innovation in Higher Education:
a perspective from the Netherlands

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Preface

The last ten years we see a growing interest in honours programmes at Dutch research universities. Honours programmes are designed for the more talented students. The last two years all the universities in the Netherlands change their programmes to the bachelor-master system. This makes the honours programmes more popular.

The first ten years of experience give the strong impression that honours programmes have positive spin-off effects on the regular programme. This IVLOS-report gives an overview of the results of our exploratory research on honours programmes as a source of innovation. The text has been the base of an interactive presentation of Marca Wolfensberger and Albert Pilot at the 38th annual conference of the National Collegiate Honors Council in November 2003 in Chicago, U.S.A.
A more detailed overview of Dutch honours programmes can be found in Mededeling 69¹ (in Dutch) also published by the IVLOS, Institute of Education.

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Questions about this report can be posed to the authors and other members of the ‘Plusnetwerk’ the platform for academic plus and honours programmes in the Netherlands

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¹ URL: http://www2.ivlos.uu.nl/downloads/nederlandstalig/index.htm
Honours Programmes, Sources of Innovation in Higher Education: a Perspective from the Netherlands

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Honours programmes are rapidly developing in Dutch universities. The first honours programme was introduced in 1993. Ten years later, 25 programmes have been started at ten universities. With the introduction in the Netherlands (and in other countries of the European Union) of the bachelor-master system, a growing interest in honours programmes is expected. The present honours programmes differ widely in duration, content, educational design, and place in the curriculum. A survey study has pointed out that many of them fulfill the function of a ‘laboratory’ for innovation in the regular programmes. They offer a safe environment for educational experiments in which mistakes are allowed, the risk of failure is low, and all participants are motivated. An important gain: in case of proven success, the innovations spread to the regular programmes.

1. Summary

In Dutch universities, honours programmes are a recent and fast growing development. The first such programmes started in 1993. Ten years later 25 programmes have been launched at ten universities. Significant are the diversity in the type of programmes, their length, and their positioning in the curriculum. At least 16 of the 25 programmes did indeed have the function of a living laboratory for educational innovations in the regular programmes. The study provides data on the type of programmes, the certificates involved, the procedures for selection of the students, and the factors that influence their functioning as experiments for educational innovations. We present a typology of honours programmes in The Netherlands, and describe their spin-off effects. We indicate key factors for success in terms of spin-off effects. Our main question whether honours programmes have innovative capacities for the normal curriculum is answered positively. After proven success, innovations of the honours programmes are implemented in the regular curriculum.

2. Introduction and research questions

A number of Dutch universities have developed honours programmes for students wanting more and being able to do more than the regular curriculum offers them (Van Eijl et al., 2003). This is a recent trend in the Dutch context. We define honours programmes as being specifically developed to offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than the regular programmes. They are meant for the more motivated, and gifted students who want more and have the capacity to do more. They demonstrate a great variety in pedagogical design and organization. Their main goal is to provide academic opportunities that challenge students to perform at their highest level of excellence. Additional goals range from the stimulation of talent, the attraction of new talented teachers and students of outstanding academic ability, a contribution to the university profile, to a ‘living laboratory’ for educational experiments that could be adopted by the regular programme (Wolfensberger et al, 2003 a & b; Van Eijl et al, 1999; Van Dam & De Klerk, 1998). The latter is also cited as an important goal of honours programmes in the United States: “educational innovation and honours have often been allied. The development of honours courses and curriculum is necessarily an exercise in innovation” (Austin, 1991, p. 16).

Considering the (explicit or implicit) goal of innovation, it is interesting to analyse to what extent the innovative honours programmes are able to generate spin-off effects on the regular programmes. Additionally, a thorough analysis of the factors stimulating these spin-off effects is important, as the diffusion of educational innovations is often difficult - even when having obvious advantages. If honours programmes can be demonstrated to be a source of innovation, it will strengthen the position of and appreciation for these programmes. It may also help to refute the point of view that they are exclusively for ‘a happy few’, the participating students. This leads to the following main research questions of this paper:
To what extent do Dutch honours programmes function as an educational laboratory for the regular programmes?

What kind of innovations and changes in the regular programmes are generated by honours programmes?

What characteristics of the honours programmes are related to the strength of the spin-off effect?

This paper starts with a brief sketch of current Dutch and European developments within the higher education sector. An important development is the Europe-wide introduction of the bachelor-master system. After a short explanation of our research methods, the paper continues with three empirical sections: firstly, a description of the main characteristics of Dutch honours programmes such as the number of credit hours, their duration, selection procedures, etc. Secondly, we present a typology of Dutch honours programmes, and finally, we describe their spin-off effects. These empirical sections are followed by a paragraph on the key factors for success in terms of such effects. The paper ends with a conclusion and discussion.

3. Dutch and European Higher Education: current developments

All over Europe, the realisation of the ‘European Higher Education Area’ is now the single most important issue on the agenda of universities and other institutes of higher education. The main issue is to implement the structure of Bachelor and Master programmes that will make student mobility and the comparison of grades easier. It started in June 1999 when the Ministers responsible for higher education from 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration. They agreed on important joint objectives for the development of a single and cohesive European Higher Education Area by 2010. In the first follow-up conference held in Prague in May 2001, they increased the number of objectives and reaffirmed their commitment. In September 2003, the Ministers from 33 European countries met in Berlin in order to review the progress achieved, and to set priorities and new objectives for the coming years, with a view to speeding up the realisation of the European Higher Education Area (Conference of Ministers, 2003).

The European Commission monitored the progress towards the European Higher Education Area. The European University Association, EUA (Reichert and Tauch, 2003) did the research for the trend study. This study shows that in the majority of the European countries the process of implementing the structure of Bachelor and Master programmes is well on its way. But it also shows that there are great differences. Although there is a growing awareness among the different groups in higher education, the reforms have yet to reach the majority of the grassroots representatives, who are supposed to implement them, and give them concrete meaning. Deliberations on the implementation of the Bologna declaration involve heads of institutions rather than the academics themselves. Hence, interpreting Bologna at departmental level, in the light of its goals and the whole context of its objectives, i.e. rethinking current teaching structures, units, methods, evaluation, and the interaction between disciplines and institutions, is a task that lies still ahead for a majority of academics at European universities. This does not mean, of course, that no reforms are being undertaken, but that these reforms are not explicitly associated with the Bologna process (Reichert and Tauch, 2003). The trend report gives a great many details, of which we mention only two. More than two thirds of the heads of institutions consider it essential to make rapid progress towards the European Higher Education Area. Another 20% support the idea, but think that the time is not yet ripe for it. According to the representatives of ministries, rectors’ conferences, and higher education institutions, raising the academic quality and the employability of graduates are the two most frequently mentioned driving forces behind the Bologna process.

In the Netherlands, we seem to be way ahead of many other countries, because, in nearly all institutions in September 2002, the Bachelor-Master programmes were introduced for all new students. In the whole of Germany, the Germans have a small number of students enrolled in new programmes, but the majority of these programmes are still in the phase of preparation for the transformation. In Scandinavia, the Danes introduced the Bachelor programmes in 1993, but without the broad impact and transformational consequences of the present Bologna process. The Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish universities are well on their way, aiming at full implementation in 2005. In Great Britain and Ireland, the situation is different because they already had the Bachelor-Master structure, and would now have to implement the Bologna principles. Further details can be found in the reports of all countries to the Berlin Conference (http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/).
An important conclusion is that European documents on bachelor-master contain almost no references to honours programmes. One study on Master Degrees and Joint Degrees (Tauch and Rauhvargers, 2002) refers to honours programmes, because they might become important in the selection for master programmes. In general, however, little if any reference is made to European honours programmes. This may change in the near future. In the Netherlands, 10 out of 13 universities at present have honours programmes. Firstly, because many of their undergraduate programmes have been broadened, thus creating new opportunities for honours programmes that allow for enrichment. Secondly, because it is becoming more important for students to distinguish themselves in order to be admitted to (selective) master programmes. Lastly, because honours programmes are common in the Anglo-Saxon Higher Education system, which served as the model for the European bachelor-master implementation (see appendix 1). Considering the forward position of the Netherlands in the introduction of the bachelor-master system, it can be expected that honours programmes will also spread to other European countries as they adopt the system. For this reason the remaining part of this article will focus on developments in Dutch honours education.

4. Research methods

We selected honours programmes defined as programmes specifically developed to offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than the regular programmes. The programmes are meant for the more motivated, and gifted students who want more, and have the capacity to do more. The empirical basis of this research is formed by the Dutch situation. A first inventory of all honours programmes at Dutch research-based universities was made in January 2003. These were all programmes their organisers viewed as honours programmes, and which more or less satisfied our definition. The inventory is reasonably complete: some programmes that are currently being developed have also been included. In addition, new information received in the period February – April has also been included. It remains possible, though, that we missed an honours program, because some are known under a different name. Because of the introduction in the Netherlands of the bachelor-master system, we expect great changes in the near future.

Our prime level of analysis was programmes and their characteristics, such as selection, credits, period, etc. This also means that we limited our research to programmes that usually consist of a series of courses or modules. Individual ‘honours’ assignments within courses are not included in this inventory, except when they are part of a more extensive honours programme.

For this research, the knowledge has been used of the nationwide ‘Plusnetwork’, a platform for academic honours programmes, and its available documents and websites. Additional information came from interviews with some teachers, co-ordinators, and directors of honours programmes. For the analysis (quantitative and qualitative) of the data, the method of grounded theory was used (Savenye & Robinson, 2001). Two researchers independently coded the data, and compared the characteristics of the programmes. Our inventory included the effects of the programmes on the regular curricula. This part of the inventory was merely based upon interviews with the coordinators. Also, the influence of government policy making on universities was not included in this analysis. In case an honours program causes or contributes to an innovation, we have labelled this as honours program spin-off. Examples are derived from an in-depth study of some cases supplementary to the characteristics, and to control the overall picture regarding aspects of educational innovation (Wolfensberger et al., 2003).

5. Results of analysing the inventory: Characteristics of honours programmes at Dutch universities

The inventory resulted in 25 honours programmes at ten (of the thirteen) different research-based Dutch universities, and at one inter-university foundation. All honours programmes are relatively young: the first started in 1993, and the last ten programmes were started after 1999. Some universities intend to start an honours programme in the near future, or their honours are still ‘under construction’. This recent growth in programmes is probably related to the introduction of the bachelor-master system, as can be seen in university plans and policies. The Erasmus University of Rotterdam, for example: “In the competition, the quality of the educational programmes will be of decisive importance (…). Development of an ‘Honours Program’ for the gifted students is considered necessary” (chairman of the Committee for Educational Innovation, Van der Graaf, 2002). And at the Technical University Eindhoven, it
has been understood that “...if the university wants to have the best students, it should have an honours program (...). With such a program students are motivated to use and develop their talents fully and the university shows that it values the good students” (Groep Eén, 2003). Also, students are discovering that it is becoming more important to distinguish oneself in the competition for international master studies.

In our research, we analysed programmes and their characteristics, such as selection and credits. We excluded other possible common features such as their educational goals (e.g. teaching critical thinking, and promoting self-reflectiveness or leadership), or the typical characteristics of honours faculty members. The experiences in the United States show that such an inventory can be usefully made: “the Teaching and Learning Committee of the National Collegiate Honours Council has found significant agreement on the goals of honours educations and some important similarities among faculty members teaching in honours” (West, 2002). In addition, the different ways in which content is modified in the honours programmes - acceleration, enrichment, sophistication, or novelty (Gallagher, 2000, p. 689) – are not included in our inventory.

The key characteristic of honours programmes is that they are programs developed for a specific purpose, heavier and more challenging, meant for motivated and talented students who want more, and can do more than the regular programmes provide for. This is reflected in their selection procedures, more demanding study tasks, and in their forms of assessment and certification. In such a way, students are offered an extra possibility to develop themselves intellectually and academically. The programme variations are wide. They differ in duration and structure, types of students involved, years of study in which they are scheduled, number of credits required, total credit hours involved in the program, educational methods and assessment (Van Eijl et al., 2003). The way these programmes are being financed and organised differs in each university. Despite all these differences in design and content, there are often a number of common characteristics, as is shown in Table 1. Many of these are not unique for the Netherlands, but are also found in the United States (Austin, 1986; Groot Zevert et al., 1997). We will explain these characteristics here.

a. In honours programmes, mainly small-scale educational methods are being used varying from individual education to groups of 20 students. This can enhance the interaction between the participants, and between students and teacher, and provides more opportunities to follow the individual interests of students.

b. Active participation is evident, for instance discussion and feedback, presentations of a research design, and excursions. Peer-interaction is an important characteristic of an honours programme. Active participation during lectures, besides strengthening the motivation and the stimulation of independent study, receive attention.

c. Many context-specific and pedagogical novelties and renewal of the content are found in honours programmes. Special attention is paid to academic skills, interdisciplinary pedagogy, a reflective student portfolio, intervision, strong student participation, challenging course content, new ways of assessment, peer feedback.

d. Honours programmes are completed with a testimonial, certificate, an additional text on the diploma, or a special diploma such as Master in Veterinary Research. The graduation is sometimes an official academic event, for instance at Leiden University or Nijmegen, where the vice-chancellor personally presents the honours diploma to the students.

e. The program is more demanding. In 18 honours cases, students do not receive ‘honours credits’, which have no legal status, but the time spent on the honours programme is made clear in a testimonial. In five of the honours programmes, students receive credit points because they have participated in these programmes instead of in the regular programme.

f. Different types of entry selection are being used for admission to the honour programmes. A GPA has been used, and motivation as demonstrated in a letter of application of the students. The competition rate of students in the curriculum and a recommendation of the mentor play a role.

g. In sixteen cases, the Honours programmes are considered as a laboratory for innovation in content and pedagogy for the regular programmes. Most honours programmes do not present themselves with a clear mission statement or vision, as is often seen in the United States. The laboratory function is usually not stated as an objective of the honours programmes, but this is certainly one of its side effects.
Table 1 Characteristics in pedagogical design, organisation, and content of honours programmes in Dutch universities (N=25)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Not present</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Small scale education</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Active participation of students</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Pedagogical innovations</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Testimonial or diploma for honours certification</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. ‘Honorary’ credit points</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Selection procedures</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Laboratory function</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Only non-freshman</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Special attention for research and design skills</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j 1. Coordinator</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j 2. Coach/mentor/tutor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

h. Most honours programmes are meant for non-freshman students. Only two programmes are for freshman students only, five are meant for all students, and thirteen are explicitly for master students. This is in contrast with the situation in the United States, where the honours programmes are only organised for bachelor students.

i. In a number of programmes, special attention is being paid to research and design skills. Nine programmes offer honours students the possibility to do research at an earlier stage and to a more advanced level than in the regular programmes. In upper years, the connection is made with a Ph.D. dissertation. The honours programme can be seen as a nursery for research talent.

j. In three quarters of the programmes, a coordinator or director is present to run and develop the programme. Sometimes, he or she is also a teacher in the programme. An active attitude in the recruitment of the students and the dissemination of publicity is developing. Also, a coach or student counsellor is important in the programme. A coach can encourage the student to work on his academic achievement; and to start with a new challenge. There were no explicit questions about the role of the coach or counsellor in the inventory. In the United States, this seems to be a point of prime importance (Groot Zevert et al., 1997, p. 16).

Distribution of honours programmes among disciplines

The honours programmes in the Netherlands are present in most disciplines, with the exception of the medical sciences. Until now, only one example has been found: the Track of Excellence in Veterinary Science at Utrecht University. This is the oldest honours programme, and offers to a small group of selected students the possibility to qualify themselves thoroughly in Veterinary Research.

Table 2 Honours programmes (N=25) in different disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplines</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Humanities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary 1)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary 2)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) Programme involves an integrative combination of disciplines.
2) For example University College Utrecht and University College Maastricht.

Four of the five honours programmes in the field of Science and Technology are multidisciplinary within this field. They consist of a combination of two disciplines. There is a rather uniform distribution of the honours programmes in the disciplines of the (13) Dutch universities. The medical disciplines appear to be an exception. We found only one instance: the Track of Excellence at the Faculty of Veterinary Sciences as described above (see Table 2). The Science and Technology domain is well represented with 5 programmes.

Ethnicity and gender in the student population

In this paper, we concentrate on two issues only: ethnicity and gender. Ethnic students form an interesting group. The statistical data show that the percentage of ethnic students coming from secondary schools and going on to higher education is rapidly rising in the Netherlands: it...
doubled in the last four years as a percentage of the whole group of new students. And in the recent four years, the percentage of these students going on to higher education is higher than in the group of native students (calculated as a percentage of those leaving secondary school (Onderwijsinspectie, 2003; HBO-raad, 2003).

Another interesting group is that of female students. In the Dutch universities, the number and percentage of female students has been steadily rising. The percentage of female students entering the university is higher than that of male students (52% was female in 2002/2003). But also, the percentage of female students amongst graduating students is rising rapidly: in 1989/1990 41% of the graduates were females, while in 2001/2002 this percentage rose to 52%. Females graduate faster: 58 months versus 64 months for their ‘doctorandus’ degree (equivalent to a master's degree) in 2001/2002.

Although we have no specific data on gender and ethnicity in the population of honours students, it is our impression (based on visits and interviews) that the male/female ratio equals roughly 50%, while few ethnic students seem to participate in the honours programmes. Both groups are interesting when we look at the honours programmes: what is the situation when looking at the students taking part in the programmes, what is the distribution, do we get the students we want for these programmes, or is there still a barrier to take?

**Financing honours programmes**

We see a lot of diversity in the way the honours programmes are being financed. Some are financed by means of educational innovation projects, some directly by the central administration of a university, and some are financed by a department. Until now, there is no differentiation of the costs for students per bachelor or master programme: students pay a fixed annual amount determined by the government. Also, none of the honours programmes require students to pay an extra amount for participation. We assume that the rapid growth of the number of honours programmes will lead to new debates on the financing of honours programmes.

**A breeding ground for researchers**

Many Dutch honours programmes are intended for students with at least two years of academic experience. In these programmes, special attention is being paid to research and design competencies, sometimes by way of a probation term at a research institute. Thus, the honours programme gives students the opportunity to discover whether they are really interested and competent in doing research. For the university, it has the function of a breeding ground for highly talented students. After a positive evaluation of the activities by student and university, many of them enter a Ph.D. programme. This function of the honours programmes will be an issue for further development and evaluation, because of the restructuring of the academic programmes into the Bachelor-Master system.

### 6. Results of analysing the inventory: Typology of honours programmes at Dutch universities

Based on the analysis of the data in the inventory, we have drawn up a typology of honours programmes. From a disciplinary perspective, we can distinguish three types of honours programmes: (mono)disciplinary (14), interdisciplinary (6) and multidisciplinary programmes (5). We expected different spin-off effects from these three groups of programmes, because of their differences in character and organisation.

a. In the 14 disciplinary honours programmes, deepening the understanding of the subjects of a discipline is the main goal. The department involved finances this kind of honours programmes. Participating teachers and students originate from this department. The programmes are organised as an extra opportunity for deepening the understanding, with much attention for the contents of the subject, academic education (‘Bildung’), methodology, and research. Students usually take these courses as an extra to the regular programme.

b. In the 6 interdisciplinary honours programmes, the focus is on subjects and themes that cover and go beyond different disciplines. In all cases, the interdisciplinary approach receives attention. These programmes are an ‘extra’ for students wanting to broaden their academic education (‘Bildung’) beyond the scope of their main subject. This type of honours programme is organised and financed at the level of the university as a whole. In most of them, all (selected) students can join (and teachers are drawn) from all over the university.

b. The 5 multidisciplinary programmes are made up of different disciplines. In these programmes, relations between the disciplines are not an explicit issue for
discussion. These programmes are a complete substitute for the regular programmes. An example is the kind of so-called TWIN Programmes that lead to a double (doctorandus = master's) degree (for example in chemistry and physics), or to a full bachelor degree at honours level. The departments involved finance the programme.

Of course, in practice, combinations of programmes exist, e.g. a disciplinary honours programme with an interdisciplinary component. In this study, we classified these mixed forms as to their main characteristic.

Otherwise, it has to be said that there are some differing opinions on whether this third type (multidisciplinary) should be labelled an honours programme. According to our definition, they are programmes specifically developed to offer educational opportunities that are more challenging and demanding than the regular programmes. The programmes are meant for the more motivated, and gifted students, who want more and have the capacity to do more. It is relevant to give a short comment on this.

Three of the five multidisciplinary honours programmes are programmes in the fields of science and technology, called ‘TWIN-programmes’. Students are given the opportunity to study a combined programme of two interrelated degree programmes, instead of one. This is a demanding programme typically for the more motivated and able students. We include these programmes even though they consist largely of existing regular courses, because the TWIN-programmes are specifically designed for more gifted students. This does not mean that any student who pursues two bachelor degrees can be called an honours student. This is not considered an honours programme, since it is a student’s individual choice rather than a specifically designed honours programme. In addition, an honours programme not only requires extra effort, it also confronts students with more complex content, and it challenges students to excel.

The other two multidisciplinary honours programmes are at liberal arts and sciences colleges offering an honours bachelor degree. Selection is strict for these international programmes. Once the student has entered these programmes, a high GPA has to be maintained. One can argue whether this is an honours programme as defined in this research. After all, it offers a complete degree programme, rather than a programme parallel to a regular programme. We decided to include the liberal arts and sciences colleges in our inventory. We argue that both multidisciplinary honours colleges are a part of a university, which can be considered as the ‘regular programmes’.

### Characteristics of honours programmes in the United States

Four types of honours courses can be identified (Schuman, 1965):

- **An enrichment part in a regular course.** Honours and non-honours students together participate in the same course. The honours students do an extra assignment, often an in-depth paper, or a project. This form is the one easiest to organise and requires not too much extra teacher time.

- **Honours sections as part of a regular course for honours students only.** These sections cover more or less the same study materials as the regular course, but offer extra literature, the standards are higher, and the groups are smaller. This type of course is especially used in general introductory courses, where talented and motivated students experience the regular programme as too much repetition, and not challenging enough.

- **The most popular form is the honours course, a course especially developed for honours students.** These are often interdisciplinary, and are characterised by the interactive approach of a motivated team of teachers. This is an inviting and challenging form, and demands the most from the teachers and the financial support. This form is often used at the larger institutions.

- **An honours project is research-focused on enrichment and going deeper.** It is usually organised in the final year of study on an individual basis, under the guidance of a teacher. Sometimes, it is finalised with an exam. Honours projects are often done in combination or as a completion of other honours activities.

Honours programmes are an important key for gaining access to a prestigious master programme at a highly qualified university.
Table 3 Three types of honours programmes (N=24) and their spin-off effects in four fields of outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Programme</th>
<th>Course content/new course</th>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
<th>Educational instruments</th>
<th>Structure of the programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary (14)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary (5)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary (5)</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Results: Spin-off effects – changes in the regular programme

Our main research question is: to what extent do Dutch honours programmes function as an educational laboratory for the regular programmes? What kind of innovations and changes in the regular programmes do honours programmes generate? What characteristics of the honours programmes are related to the strengths of the spin-off effects? To answer these questions, we concentrate on those outcomes of honours programmes that can be seen as visible effects of the laboratory function. What innovations and changes can be found in the regular programmes as a result of the honours programme activities, and which characteristics are related to these outcomes? The analysis is confined to the 24 university honours programmes. The inter-university programme is left out of consideration.

As mentioned before: our motivation for these research questions is twofold: to test whether honours programmes reach their goal of being a living laboratory for educational experiments for the benefit of the regular programmes, and to research whether these honour programmes are only for a happy few or that they benefit all students – in this research by spin-off for the regular programmes. After all, various educational strategies and special courses for honours programmes recommended for talented and motivated students could be profitably used for all students. The novelties of the honours programmes include many approaches such as critical thinking, creative writing, problem solving, free choices, inquiry, and discovery. All students profit from the challenge of learning to do their own thinking and of making their own choices. We do realise, however, that not all practices from the honours programmes should be transferred to the regular programmes: not all elements of the honours programme are beneficial to students in the regular programme, since - naturally - honours students differ from non-honours students. “For gifted students, the content level involved in the discovery and problem solving could be at a higher level of abstraction than possible for the average student….. Also, Shore and Delcourt note that ability grouping, acceleration, and differential programming are particularly useful for gifted students.” (Gallagher, 2000, p. 688). Our focus was therefore on innovations realised in the regular programmes that have their origin in the honours programmes.

The outcomes can be categorised into four main fields: innovations in course content, in pedagogy, in educational instruments, and in programme structure. By spin-off of ‘course content’, we mean the content of a course in the regular programme having been changed by the direct inducement of the honours programme, or that a new course has been developed. By spin-off in pedagogy, we mean changes in the outline of courses in the regular programme, or in the way the teachers are now teaching these courses. By spin-off in ‘educational instruments’, we mean instructional systems intended as a template for students, such as a portfolio or a learning contract. And finally, spin-off in the field of programme structure leads to changes in the overall structure, content, sequence, and outline of the programme. Table 3 shows the distribution of the spin-off effects of the three types of honours programmes in the four fields of outcomes. We will elaborate on the process of innovation per type of honours programme, and will give an example of each (see also appendix 2).

Spin-off effects of disciplinary honours programmes

The 14 disciplinary honours programmes largely appeared to have spin-off effects in the field of ‘Course content’ (7 out of 14, 50%) and ‘Pedagogy’ (12 / 85%). It is evident that there is a strong content relationship between the disciplinary honours programme and the regular programme. The innovative and experimental content of honours programmes is in most cases closely connected to the regular programme, and can be easily integrated into it, after proven success.
Sometimes, teachers also developed honours courses in response to the question: what can now be improved in the content of the regular programme. In our research, we found examples of new courses developed for the regular programme as an effect of spin-off (sometimes as a duplicate of the honours programme course). In disciplinary honours programmes, teachers acquire a ‘new’ understanding and skills in the domain of instructional methods. And it appeared that they use these skills rather easily in the standard programme, which in most cases they also teach. Spin-off is also stimulated by the flow of information between students involved in the honours programme and students not involved. This information flows naturally, because most honours students follow both paths. The students function as gatekeepers of innovations. The spin-off effects of the disciplinary honours programmes were visible in a relatively short time, and we see that departments as a whole do indeed profit from the educational innovations.

**Example.** A study in more depth of some programmes gives more details of the spin-off from the honours programmes (Van Eijl et al., 2003). One interesting and illustrative example of the effect of a disciplinary honours programme on the content of the regular programme was found in the Track of Excellence of the Utrecht University Faculty of Geosciences. A group of students did their course on research activities within this Track of Excellence, from January to June 1999 at universities in Bergen (Norway) and Barcelona (Spain). They discovered that there considerably more attention was paid to qualitative methods of research than was the case at Utrecht University. The students were of the opinion that because of this, they did not have enough freedom to choose their research problem and research methods. Back in Utrecht, this was their motive to start a discussion with their teachers of research methods, which in turn led to a discussion in the Faculty newsletter. The first result was that the next group of students in the Track of Excellence were offered special lectures on qualitative methods of research. The evaluation results were positive, and already in the same year resulted in lectures on this subject for all 150 students. The spin-off of this Track of Excellence can not only be recognised in changes in the regular curriculum, such as changes in content, but also in changes in the pedagogy, and in a growing understanding amongst teachers to focus more on the interests and input of students, and to work with more interactive instructional strategies. In October 2000, the dean wrote that the Track of Excellence should not only be seen as a challenge for students and staff members, but also as a breeding ground for the new undergraduate programme, because this programme “will ask for a more active attitude on the part of the students. More so than in the past, they will influence the game. This will also require a different role of the teachers. Next to instruction, the analysis of strong and weak aspects of the work of students, and feedback on the enhancement of competencies will be a more important task” (Hooimeijer, 2000).

**Spin-off effects of interdisciplinary honours programmes**

The interdisciplinary honours programmes showed spin-off effects in the field of course content (mostly leading to new courses), and in the field of pedagogy and educational instruments. The interdisciplinary honours programmes also develop new courses on interdisciplinary subjects. Those courses aim at a deeper understanding of interdisciplinary relations between subjects, and are specifically meant for students in the honours programme. These courses are rather new, and (until now) not available for students in the regular programme. It was difficult to get reliable data about the spin-off effects on the pedagogy. However, it appears that the teachers in such an honours programme become more conscious of their responsibility, and feel more involved in trying to raise the educational quality within their own regular programme. The teachers and students of these interdisciplinary programmes come from various departments, and come together within the programme. These teachers take their new understanding and skills in the field of pedagogy back to their regular programme. Because the setting in their department is different, and their students have virtually no communication with those of the honours programme, it will be more difficult for them to apply their new skills (and for us to get reliable data on the effects). However, we found some clear instances of those effects.

The interdisciplinary honours programmes aim at large groups of students, and are mostly organised and financed at the central organisation level of the university. These honours programmes appeared to be a basis for experiments with educational instruments. Experiences and evaluations of success factors were used for the implementation of these instruments in the university as a whole.
Example. The University of Amsterdam, for example, uses her interdisciplinary honours programme for motivated first year students as a breeding ground for a digital portfolio. Thanks to this honours programme, and through the dissemination within this university of information about this instrument, an important step in the development of the reflective digital portfolio for students was made. Many regular programmes at the University of Amsterdam have now taken the initiative to implement the portfolio system, and the experiences within the honours programme with assignments on reflection and coaching have much contributed to the development of the understanding of this instrument within these regular programmes. In this case, we also discovered that the outcomes of the honours programme and its spin-off effects have also influenced the honours programme itself. The programme started for the first year students (freshmen) of six large departments. The results of the programme have had a great influence on the educational policy of the University of Amsterdam, and in 2003, the honours programme was implemented for all students of the university, involving all departments. This effect seems to have led to an institutional effect, and shows a connection with the field ‘Structure of the programme’.

Spin-off effects of multidisciplinary honours programmes
The two liberal arts and sciences colleges included as multidisciplinary honours programmes differ from the other multidisciplinary honours programmes in the sense that the former offer complete degree programmes. Consequently, participating students only work together with other honours students, and do not interact with students at the ‘mother university’ of these honours colleges. Hence, these students cannot function as gatekeepers of innovations for the regular programme. Faculty often has a position both at the honours college and the ‘mother university’, which means that they can function as gatekeepers.

The other three multidisciplinary honours programmes are the TWIN-programmes: students follow two related bachelor programmes. Here, the spin-off effects flow more naturally since faculty is engaged in both the honours programme and the regular programme. Typically, the TWIN-programmes offer a rare reason for faculty members of two scientific fields to co-operate and to co-create an educational programme. TWIN-programmes require a re-thinking of the disciplinary kernels, and often an adaptation of the schedules.

Example
The University College Utrecht (UCU) of Utrecht University is a multidisciplinary honours programme that has proved to have influenced many other university programmes. Initially, there was within Utrecht University a great deal of resistance against the UCU programme. The innovation, however, found a solid base when the UCU concept proved to be a success, and students, the University Board, and many outstanding professors began showing their commitment to this innovative programme. After this green light, UCU was largely used as a breeding ground. This was further increased by the fact that UCU attracted a group of teachers that showed a relatively great enthusiasm for trying out new educational concepts. Another factor is the diversity of the student population (international, grown up in different educational systems). This forces College teachers and staff into experiments with instructional content and form. The fact that teachers from different academic disciplines meet each other here has to a certain extent also been a source of inspiration for spin-off. The selection system, which does not exist in the regular programmes elsewhere in the Netherlands, brought a capable and motivated group of students together, which in itself also makes it easier to experiment with content and instructional methods. This gave teachers experiences that were later on to be disseminated in the regular programme.

With this international Bachelor Programme at an honours level, Utrecht University obtained a wide-ranging expertise in liberal arts and sciences learning, a new educational concept in Dutch universities. When in 2002, Utrecht University introduced the bachelor-master structure in the whole university, the UCU (University College Utrecht) programme had the function of a visionary model for the new programmes. More specifically, this concerned the design of a more liberal arts and sciences learning curriculum with an emphasis on a broad spectrum of academic education (‘Bildung’) and skills, more freedom of choice in the requirements of the programme, more coaching of the students, more tests and feedback within the courses, and a marked reduction of the number of re-sits. These elements have been more or less adopted and adapted in the university-wide framework for the implementation of the bachelor-master structure (Vermeulen & Van Kammen, 2002a, 2002b).
8. Key factors for success in terms of spin-off effects

In the study, we saw that the three types of honours programmes have spin-off effects in different fields (see Table 3). The question now is which of the characteristics, related to the honours programmes (see Table 1, p. 5), correlate with the spin-off effects in the regular programmes? Four of the characteristics appeared at least to be important for the dissemination of the experiences from honours programmes to the regular programmes. Also, in the innovations of regular programmes that seem to be related with honours programmes, factors such as institutional policy and human resource management can play a role. In this study, we have not included these factors.

a) Innovation as a goal

In most honours programmes (16), the management have implicitly or explicitly opted for the laboratory function. In some, innovation was explicitly mentioned in the mission right from the start, in others this function proved to be effective in practice. The new interdisciplinary honours programmes, established at the start of the bachelor-master structure, mention their laboratory function the most explicitly (see Table 4, next page). Five programmes do not have the laboratory function, because they were established with a different goal, and do not aim at educational innovation. Some examples of these programmes offer the opportunity of getting a double degree. In some other examples, the goal is to offer an honours programme that should have an extraordinary character; and the impression is that spin-off effects would diminish this character.

However, the five programmes that do not have an explicit laboratory function frequently do have spin-off effects on the regular programme. The double degree programmes of the faculties of Physics and Mathematics at Utrecht University, for example, have led to more contacts on subject matter and pedagogy between the teachers of these faculties who previously did not communicate very much. It appears that some teachers (and/or the director) involved in honours are often innovators. They are eager to experiment with new ideas. They play a gate-keeping role in the flow of new ideas into a social system. Some of the other teachers (or the director) have the characteristics of so-called ‘early adopters and persons with authority’. Their role is “to decrease uncertainty about a new idea by adopting it and conveying a subjective evaluation of the innovation to near-peers by means of interpersonal networks” (Rogers, 1971, p. 240). It is very well possible that one of the reasons why the diffusion of innovations from honours programmes to regular programmes proceeds at a relatively quick pace, is because those early adopters work in the honours programmes as well as in the regular programmes. For, in order to implement the novelty in the honours programme, the teacher has to pass through the innovation-decision process. This process takes time, from the first knowledge of an innovation, forming an opinion on it, to deciding on implementing it. When his/her new course, or pedagogy, or instrument proves to be successful, it is much easier for the teacher to implement this now–confirmed innovation in the regular programme.

b) Extra credits or honorary credits – intrinsic motivation enlarges the capacity for innovation

It varies with each honours programme whether students get credits or not, and if they do, how many they get. In addition, the ways the programmes are completed differ (table 5). For most honours programmes (fifteen), the study load is extra – so the students do the honours programme and the regular programme simultaneously. This is expressed by the fact that students do not get any credits for the honours programme, or they receive so-called honorary credits. These are not official credits – but they do indicate the workload of the course. Some programmes give ‘extra credits’ – these are official credits, but students cannot use them for compulsory courses. The five multidisciplinary programmes offer a complete curriculum instead of the regular curriculum, so of course those programmes give official credits, and provide an official bachelor diploma.

As students mostly do not receive any official credits for their study efforts in the honours programme, their intrinsic motivation must be high. Honours programmes are something extra, a surplus, and students follow them because of the challenge, the joy of learning and the honour. Teachers join the program because of the challenge. The honours programmes have a strong appeal, and the fact people join them without getting something official in return makes the programmes strong persuaders. So, the innovations of the programmes are easily accepted by and implemented in the regular programmes.
Table 4 Laboratory function of the three types of honours programmes (N=24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of honours programme</th>
<th>Laboratory function</th>
<th>No laboratory function</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary (14)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary (5)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary (5)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 Awarding credits in honours programmes (N=24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No credits or honorary credits</th>
<th>Extra credits</th>
<th>Mix (official and extra)</th>
<th>Credits</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary (14)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary (5)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary (5)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Recently, many new honours programmes have been developed, and the issue of credits for students' efforts is receiving a lot of attention. This is stimulated by new financing procedures within universities, which are based on a fixed amount per obtained credit. Honours programmes that do not allocate credits to their courses may come into difficulties, since their courses will not be paid for by the university.

We do not know if receiving credits is of any influence on the student participation in the honours programmes. Also, we do not know if obtaining a testimonial, an honours certificate, or an honours diploma is of any influence on student participation. We did not do any research on the civil effects of those 'Honours diplomas'. We assume that the fact that students do not receive any official credits, but do get a special diploma and a special graduation day, contributes to the special academic and intellectual climate within these honours programmes.

c) Selection & motivation enhances the laboratory character

The admission procedures and the self-selection contribute to a safe learning environment, which favours experimentation. Most honours programmes (21) have selection and admission procedures (table 1 and 6) in which average marks are important. This objective indicator provides information about the intellectual performance, but not about academic potential, creativity, and the personal performance of the students. In the admission procedure, one therefore mainly looks beyond average study marks, and motivation plays an important role (table 6). In reality, this means that many of the honours programmes also accept students, because of their motivation even though their marks are not high enough. We think this a typically Dutch phenomenon stemming from our ‘equality culture’, and our hesitation towards selection of talent and the ranking of universities.

Some honours programmes have a 'numerus fixus', while other programmes have more places available than they have students. Only a part of the really good students with a high GPA join honours programmes. Particularly good students often have other priorities. Van den Berg (2001, p. 10) states that 9.6% of the full-time university students actively follow a double bachelor. "Those double-major students are, generally speaking the best students, who study at high speed with good results" (p. 71).

The selection and admission procedures cause that not every student joins the honours programme. A student has to enrol, must show some intellectual performance, has to write a letter of motivation, et cetera. This results in a strong self-selection before even the official procedure starts. The evaluations of the honours programmes of the Faculty of Geosciences show that students appreciate working with other strongly motivated students willing to work hard (Wolfensberger, 1998). Those students are really committed to each other and to their subject contents. This enables the teachers to experiment. The professors also mention the useful feedback from the students on their teaching. Birdwell-Pheasant (1997) recognises the value of honours students’ participation and feedback to professors: “the single most important
The distinction between honours and non-honours courses are the honours students: dedicated, motivated, fascinated students with solid foundations in prior work and with new creative insights. They spark each other (and the professor) and learning takes on a whole new dimension...The essence of honours programmes, I believe, is putting gifted people in touch with one another.”

The selection thus creates another reason why teachers feel free to use the honours programme as a laboratory; as the students are hard working clever people, the chances of study-delay are minimal.

The evaluations of honours programmes are good (Van Eijl et al, 1999; Wolfensberger, 1998): the programmes motivate the students. They are positive about the ways they are being challenged. They learn a lot of their discipline, and they learn academically. One gets the impression that honours programmes put a strong emphasis on challenge and academic ‘Bildung’, which stimulates students and teachers to take new initiatives. The focus on talent empowers the diffusion of those innovations.

The selection and admission procedures also have negative connotations. In US literature, we found a discussion about the elitist character of the honours programme, which is reinforced by the selection of students. Also, in Dutch society, a focus on talent and selection is a point for discussion (Keesen, 1998). A strong emphasis on average marks can lead to a strong competition among students (Wolfensberger et al., 2003), which is a new phenomenon in the Netherlands. Furthermore, selection and admission procedures are often said to be strange elements in the Dutch educational system, which emphasises the need for a wide educational participation without selection.

However, Wilbrink (2003, p. 52) challenges this common point of view, and argues that “the Dutch educational system does have its selection methods”. Selection takes place at the level of secondary education, when students need to make a choice between schools with different levels. Only the highest-level secondary school allows students to start a study at any Dutch university. Wilbrink’s view is supported by Passow (1988), who states that European secondary education is selective in nature, with specific schools aiming to serve the needs of intellectually able youths. Once a student has obtained this kind of diploma, he/she can enter any university. This is the opposite of the American situation, where high schools are rather inclusive and admission offices of colleges and universities do the selection of students.

d) Educational novelties – evaluations and on-going programmes

Twenty-three honours programmes do have educational novelties. The fact that the honours do have novelties is an important factor in the spin-off. Teachers are stimulated to use their creativity by working in the honours. Teachers experience a lot of freedom and responsibility to create new courses connecting with the needs of the students. The teachers do all kinds of experiments with content and pedagogy, such as discussions, small groups, student intervention, peer feedback, and peer assessment. Students experience challenge and stimulation. The honours programmes often change, because of the innovation-flow teachers and students together create. Many of the honours programmes are on-going programmes. They are evaluated on a regular basis. We can see a spin-off: the best parts of the honours are implemented in the regular programme, and the honours programme evolves further on. The honours programme of the Geosciences even implemented this spin-off effect in their mission statement and “has to been seen as a platform for innovation in the regular program” (Harms & Hogestijn, 2001, p. 8).

Also, the students can be facilitators of innovations (gatekeepers), especially because in some honours courses, the students participate in the designing of the course. Students can function as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average credits</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Progress</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary (14)</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary (5)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary (5)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
trend watchers. They pick up new elements in society, and translate those needs to their own educational system.

Many educational novelties are found in the honours programmes, instrumental as much as on pedagogy. Examples are the reflective digital portfolio, a personal tutor (coach), intervention seminars, student participation, motivation by being given freedom and responsibility, talent coaching, research projects, peer feedback, peer teaching and peer assessment, and the reduction of re-sits. Honours programmes show which new methods, contents and pedagogy can be successful. This provides the impetus for a bottom-up innovation strategy.

9. Conclusion and summary

The inventory of the honours programmes in research-based Dutch universities showed us 25 honours programmes at 10 different universities, and one inter-university honours programme. Honours programmes are a recent, fast growing development at Dutch universities. All of them are meant to provide more challenges to the motivated and talented students. The diversity among the programmes is great, but all programmes have small-scale education. Distinguishing features are active participation, educational novelties, most of the time no official credits, a special diploma, selection and an admission procedure, laboratory for innovations, focus on non-freshmen (or seniors), often with a special director of studies. The honours programmes can function as a breeding ground for research talent. The focus on talent is experienced as something positive by the interviewed teachers, students, and policy makers, and is supposed to attract new talent. There is self-selection and central selection, and the admission procedure is diverse with a focus on GPA, motivation, and references. We found strong differences as to duration, study load, organisational structure, ways of crediting, and financing. Looking at content, we found three types of honours: disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary.

The question: “to what extent do honours programmes function as a laboratory for the regular system?” can only be partially answered. Honours programmes do have strong spin-off effects. This means that students in the regular programmes do profit from the honours programmes. However, we have only examined the actual results, and have not done research into expected effects and to what extent they are being realised. Also, the influence of national and university policies is not included in this analysis. Nevertheless, we think the relationship is important. Educational innovations seem connected with honours programmes, and after proven success and obvious advantages, the actors of the regular programmes easily adopt the new ideas.

Sixteen of the 25 honours programmes function as a laboratory of educational innovations. The experiences with the educational novelties have a strong spin-off effect on the regular programmes. The spin-off effects can be categorised into four fields: course content (changes and new design of new courses), pedagogy (especially through disciplinary honours), educational instruments (especially through interdisciplinary honours), and structure of the programme (multidisciplinary).

Honours programmes are a dynamic and growing part of the Dutch universities, and the implementation of the bachelor-master structure lends a new impetus to changes in this field. It is undeniable that they are now evolving at a fast pace. This leads us to an important question related to the spin-off effects. Is the dynamic development of honours programmes causing the spin-off effects on the regular programmes, or are the characteristics of the honours programmes an autonomous drive for changes in the regular curriculum. We assume that the dynamic development and some characteristics of the honours programmes both contribute to the innovative capacity of these programmes. It is therefore important to establish which programme characteristics are essential in creating sustained spin-off effects.

Which are these key characteristics that lead to strong spin-off effects? Knowing them, gives us the opportunity to consult more specifically management teams (Wolfensberger et al. 2003-a). We found four important features. First: innovation as a mission is important. This empowers the innovative capacity of the programme. Honours programmes, which do not have an explicit function as a laboratory, do however also have spin-off effects.

The second feature is the strong appeal of the honours programmes on the students, which is being proven (in the eyes of the faculty) by not giving credits. With the exception of the multidisciplinary honours programmes, almost all do not give official credits. Teachers and students have a strong
commitment. The participants join the programme, because of the quality of the programme, and the passionate teachers. Because of this, the diffusion of the innovations is easier and positively driven: innovations are implemented, because the innovation is good, not because it is necessary to solve a problem.

The third feature is the (self)-selection and motivation, and the admission procedures. A safe learning environment is important for experimentation and for the learning process. Honours programmes can function as a laboratory, because they appear to offer a safe learning environment with highly motivated students. Teachers are able and willing to experiment, and to experiment with new content and teaching methods.

The fourth feature is the educational innovations that are designed within the honours programmes. After evaluating their success rate, innovations are often implemented in the regular courses. And the honours programmes will evolve with new innovations. Those honours programmes are dynamic and ongoing.

It is also important, as shown in other research (Wolfensberger et al, 2003-b), that policy makers are committed to the programme in order to have large spin-off effects. Guest-teachers can play a key role by introducing new perspectives, new content, and new instructional activities. Honours programmes with teachers who do not teach in the regular curriculum probably have fewer spin-off effects. The formal and informal exchange of knowledge and experiences of honours directors, teachers, students, and policy makers is crucial.

Discussion and recommendations
We identified four key characteristics of honours programmes that we believe will lead to a sustained innovative capacity, but we do realise that our assertion is based on just an indication. We strongly recommend following up on this research in a few years time, to find out whether the relation between honours programmes and innovation is still as strong as it currently is. In this respect, it will be extremely interesting to compare our findings with the experience with US honours programmes, which have been offered across the country for many years. Do the US programmes still function as educational laboratories, with strong spin-off effects on the regular programmes? In our explanation of the innovative capacity of honours programmes, we mainly focussed on characteristics of the programmes themselves. However, we have come to believe that the way an honours programme is integrated within a department can also explain its innovative capacity (Van Poucke, 2004). In this respect, it will be particularly interesting to obtain a better understanding of the process of innovation, and the transfer of innovations from the honours programme to the regular curriculum. The concept of ‘learning organisations’ (Senge, 1991), and the application of Rogers’ (1971) typology of persons involved in the innovation process (innovators, early adaptors, etc) might provide a possibility for a better understanding of this innovative process and capacity.

We expect that with the implementation of the bachelor-master structure, the interest in honours programmes will grow, and will even make honours programmes necessary from the perspective of selection and allocation for the master programmes. The process of innovation will also lead to new questions:

How will the institutions finance those honours programmes (institutionally, at departmental level, with outside funding)? Will honours programmes concentrate on bachelor students or on master students? How can the organisation and principles for giving credit best be regulated? How can the quality assurance with accreditation procedures and benchmarking now coming into practice be organised?

The Dutch honours programmes claim to place a strong emphasis on a challenging and stimulating academic atmosphere. However, until now no comparable evaluations of the honours programmes have become available. It would be interesting to conduct evaluations of honours programmes based on a common evaluation method, as provided by the NCHC (Austin, 1991).

References
APPENDIX 1: The History of Honours Programmes in the United States

The history of honours programmes in the USA dates back to at least 1922, when Frank Aydelotte started an honours programme at Swarthmore College (founded 1863), in Pennsylvania (Austin, 1986). There had already been initiatives at other universities as early as 1873 to develop special education for gifted students (Rinn, 2002), for instance, the awarding of honours, a preceptorial system, honours programmes, etc.

The plans of Aydelotte’s were derived from his experiences with the Oxford University system, where he had participated as a Rhodes scholar. In the beginning of the 19th century, two examinations for undergraduate students had been introduced in Oxford, to ascertain the educational quality of the graduates. The first examination, after one or two years, was to demonstrate the intellectual competency. The second was a final examination. Students could do these for a pass, or for an honours degree. The honours degree gave the superior students a means to distinguish themselves from the rest of their classmates.

In the beginning, only a few students applied for these exceptional examinations. In 1807, the class system was introduced: a first, a second, and a third class honours was established, in addition to the pass. The first class was for eminent students, the second for students with laudable progress, and the third for students with satisfactory results. The honours examinations were thus separated from the pass degree. This system stimulated the popularity of the special examinations for an honours degree. The second class was later divided into an upper second, and a lower second class. In 1830, even a fourth class in honours was provided.

This graduation system still exists in Great Britain. In this system, the honours examination usually consists of eight to twelve three-hour papers. They provided some choice for students on which questions to answer, and were focused on testing the ability of the students, and not their knowledge. The papers were submitted to a group of three to five examiners, including outside examiners. This could be considered as the first system of honours education in a university. Aydelotte adapted this system to more or less fit the higher education system in the USA. The honours program he proposed was initially meant for brilliant junior and senior students in the undergraduate programme. These honours students were given a greater independence, more comprehensive and less frequent examinations, and the possibility of preparing themselves for examinations by individual reading and the instruction offered by the College. They should not be subjected to day-by-day restrictions, and the secondary school character of the college instruction. Class attendance was made voluntary.

Admission to the honours programme was based on intellectual achievement (student’s grades only in the department in which he or she wished to study), and personality characteristics (enough independence and self-regulation). A major for honours students generally consisted of three related core departments (a major and two minors), to encourage students to discover the relationship between these areas of study. He introduced the seminar method (from Germany) for small groups of honour students. The seminar contained little instruction, and mainly discussion. The reading for the seminar was divided into weekly parts. Each week, students did the reading and wrote a paper about it. The reading and the papers were discussed during the seminar. The honours degree was solely based on the passing of a final examination, given at the end of the senior year. Since then, honours programmes have spread over higher education institutions in the USA, diverse in form and content. In the nineteen fifties, because of the Russian ‘Sputnik’, foundations decided to fund proposals that offered opportunities to the gifted and talented high school and college students. This further promoted the development of honours programmes in universities (Brown, 2000). Around 1966, the National Collegiate Honors Council was founded. In reality, the funding of honours programmes is not always so easy. Regular programmes and remedial programmes are also financed out of the same budget.
APPENDIX 2: Examples of innovations, using concepts from educational innovation literature

We present a short description of some examples of innovations, using concepts from the domain of educational innovation literature: Consensus, Authority, Infrastructure, and three phases (1: initiation, reaching consensus on the problem, concrete scenario on the innovation, deciding on process factors; 2: implementation; 3: consolidation (Havelock and Huberman, 1977; Fullan, 1991; Senge, 1990; Ruijter, 2002)

- A new course for all 150 sophomore students on qualitative analysis because of enthusiastic honours students - Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University

Students participating in the honours programme initiated this innovation. During their stay at a foreign university, they were inspired by a course they took on qualitative analysis. The students’ paper and their interviews on this topic with staff members of their home department helped to initiate a debate on qualitative analysis. Thus, the learning activities in the honours programme became instrumental in creating a consensus on the fact that the honours programme lacked a course in qualitative analysis. Later, it was recognised that the regular programme also lacked this kind of course. From their experiences abroad, the students had a clear vision of the intended innovation: a course on qualitative analysis, and the suggestion of a concrete solution to the problem. Both the ‘authority’ of the honours students, based on their experiences abroad, and the infrastructure of the honours programme supported this initiation process. Implementation of this specific innovation was possible through a successful experiment within the honours programme. This supported the attempt of the honours programme director to convince management and professors of the relevancy and feasibility of this innovation. They decided to integrate this innovative course into the regular programme. The period between, the students stay abroad and the introduction of the new course on qualitative analysis was about two years.

- Interdisciplinary honours students are so enthusiastic that Psychology starts its own disciplinary programme – Faculty of Psychology, University of Amsterdam

This year, Psychology starts its disciplinary honours course for freshmen. From the approximately 350 freshmen, 20 will be allowed to participate in the intensive interactive programme. The course will focus on research, good lectures, and intensive participation of the students. The students will write essays, an article, and will do some research work. About one half of the content of the course will be made in interaction with the students. The faculty will invest heavily in this course: some 5 teachers of the regular programme will be involved, and a new director/teacher has been appointed for a weekly 2.5 days. In the near future, the faculty will combine this brand-new disciplinary honours programme with the interdisciplinary honours programme.

For the past two years, the University of Amsterdam has also been offering an interdisciplinary honours course. To be granted entry, students have to write an essay, and a letter of motivation. The Interdisciplinary Institute organizes the intake procedures. The course is interdisciplinary, because students of all faculties participate, teachers from seven different departments join the programme, and the subject is always approached from several viewpoints. It is a one-semester course with a week of lectures with well-known teachers/researchers alternating with a week of seminars (maximum of 25 students) with a tutor-teacher. The participating students are very enthusiastic – so the evaluations score highly, and students want to keep in touch – also when the course is finished. Because of this, the Interdisciplinary Institute students can participate as student-tutors, and will be helped to start an honours-student club.

Also, students coming from the psychology department were very enthusiastic about the programme – even so much that some of them put more energy and study time into the interdisciplinary honours course than into the regular programme. Some students were a bit disappointed about the regular programme compared to the honours course. And the department were worried that good students would leave the regular programme for more honours courses. The department felt the urge to
schedule their own honours programme. Especially, because since the curriculum starts with 350 or 400 freshmen, it appeared to be difficult to motivate and challenge the gifted students. So, therefore, the dean invited the honours students to come and tell about the honours course, and he established a working group with students and faculty to design a disciplinary psychology honours course, running parallel to the interdisciplinary course. The dean hopes that this disciplinary honours course will also influence the content and pedagogy of the regular programme, since more of its own teachers and students are involved. He wants to give his teachers the chance to work with a small, motivated group of students. In addition, he wants to show the good psychology students that his own department can offer them a challenging and stimulating programme.

- Honours College (UCU 511 students) influences educational structure of Utrecht University (23,716 students)

The University College Utrecht (UCU) of Utrecht University is a multidisciplinary Honours Programme that has had a profound influence on the main ideas and principles used when, in 2002, Utrecht University university-wide introduced the bachelor-master structure. The motivating source of important deans, professors and enthusiastic management has been very important. It proved to be the initiation of new ideas and principles, such as a more liberal arts and sciences learning curriculum with an emphasis on a broad academic education and skills, more freedom of choice, more coaching of the students, more formative tests and feedback within the courses, and a marked reduction of the number of re-sits. Consensus about future scenarios for the programme was based on the concrete experiences with these ideas and principles of key authorities within the university. It also largely provided the educational infrastructure for the innovation activities. This made the implementation of these elements easier. They are now more or less adopted and adapted in the regular programmes within the university-wide framework of the bachelor-master structure (Vermeulen & Van Kammen, 2002a, 2002b). The consolidation is still an important issue, but now in its third year of implementation, the conclusion can be drawn that the ideas and principles of UCU have had a great influence on the new programmes and the process of innovation.

- Bridging the gap between an honours course and a regular course: Sociology and Law - Department of Law, Utrecht University

In 1999 in the Department of Law, during the experimental introduction of an honours programme, the professor teaching the course Sociology and Law for sophomore students designed an honours course for a group of high performing students, the so-called honours students. These students, a small percentage of the total group of students, opted for this honours course. It was essentially a series of seminars, in which the students would be actively involved most of the time. The teacher provided most of the content and the assignments. These assignments and the reading materials were discussed in the seminars. The assignments were graded, and their marks, in combination with the students’ participation, resulted in their final grade and credit points. This final grade replaced the multiple-choice exam of the regular course.

Students had to work very hard, and liked the course very much: this was the type of learning they really valued. This was what they had hoped for in university. The teacher was also enthusiastic about it: student questions and the discussions surpassed those of the regular course. He noticed that students studied the materials more deeply and critically than the regular students did. He wondered, however, if it was possible to bridge the gap between the regular and the honours course. To that end, he designed a new course variant: all students were given the choice to make graded written assignments. The results of these assignments should compensate for parts of the final exam.

Instead of a small percentage of the students, as with the honours course, nearly one third of the students choose for this course variant. The evaluation results showed that the students who choose for this variant liked the course more than the students who had not done so. A side effect of this approach was that the honours course was stopped, because most potential honours students went to the new course variant instead!
Looking back, it is clear that the initiative for this new variant came from the teacher, stimulated by the success of the honours course. This teacher had a clear picture of this new course variant, had the will to introduce it, and had the authority to do it. The new honours-like course variant became a part of the course Sociology and Law. The new variant was a success, but a price was also paid, because of the higher workload for the teacher and for some of his colleagues who helped grading the assignments.
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