

## Why social science students choose to do Honours

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### **Abstract**

Most Australian universities offer undergraduate students the opportunity to graduate with either a pass degree or an Honours degree. An Honours degree is usually achieved by undertaking an additional year of research-oriented study. For students in the social sciences, arts and humanities, the additional study program is usually undertaken in one discipline, such as Sociology or Criminology. This paper reports on quantitative data collected from a sample (n=80) of social science undergraduate students in order to provide an evidence-based understanding of why students choose to do Honours and determine which factors are most influential in their thinking. It was found that prospective Honours students tend towards two groups: those focussed more on the career outcomes (higher earnings, enhanced employment opportunities), and those interested more in the learning outcomes (to learn more about a particular area in their chosen discipline, learn about other areas within their discipline.) Students choose not to do Honours for mainly pragmatic reasons.

**Keywords:** Teaching Sociology, Honours, career decision-making

Most Australian universities offer undergraduate students the opportunity to graduate with either a pass degree or an Honours degree. Apart from law and engineering, an Honours degree is obtained by undertaking an additional year of research-oriented study at the completion of the undergraduate course. For students in the social sciences, arts and humanities, the additional study program is usually undertaken in one discipline, such as Sociology or Criminology. As part of the Honours study program students are required to undertake original research (usually empirical) and produce a thesis in the order of 15 -20,000 words. With this particular focus on research, the Honours year of study is the most important precursor to the independent research undertaken at the Masters or PhD level (a 'higher degree by research' – HDR).

Promotional material directed at prospective Honours students typically emphasises the benefits of doing this further year of undergraduate study; how it might lead to a higher research degree or how it provides better employment prospects. Statements like these are found on the websites of various Australian universities: 'If you are looking to improve your career prospects, open the door to further academic study, or simply indulge a passion - Honours is your next step' and 'Employers regard an Honours degree as a significant extra marker of achievement and potential; it is also the most effective way of qualifying for higher degree work at Masters and PhD level'. Despite the importance of Honours as a preparatory stage for emerging researchers, no empirical research has been conducted on the reasons why undergraduates choose to do Honours, and which factors are most important in their decision making. This paper reports on quantitative data collected from a small sample (n=80) of social science undergraduate students (mainly Sociology and some Criminology students) in order to provide an evidence-based understanding of why students choose to do Honours and determine which factors are most influential in their thinking.

It was found that prospective Honours students tend towards two groups: those focussed more on the career outcomes (higher earnings, enhanced employment opportunities), and those interested more in the learning outcomes (to learn more about a particular area in their chosen discipline, learn about other areas within their discipline.) Students choose not to do Honours for mainly pragmatic reasons.

### **Honours: background and previous research**

In this section I review briefly Sociology Honours programs at Australian Universities, and previous research into graduate students' decision-making. While Honours is generally regarded as an important part of research training, the uptake of Honours

among Australian social science students is relatively low. For example, more than half of the respondents in this study were eligible to do their Honours in Sociology. Higher Education statistics produced by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, since renamed DEEWR) indicate that in 2006 there were only 125 students doing Honours in Sociology at Australia's universities (DEST 2007). This means that approximately 2% of students with an undergraduate Sociology major go on to do Honours. In 2006, NSW universities had the most Sociology Honours students, followed in descending order by Victorian, South Australian, Queensland, Tasmanian and Western Australian universities.

To the best of my knowledge, no Australian research has been conducted on why social science students choose to do Honours, and indeed very little work has been published on the reasons why students move into graduate programs. Some international sociological research has been undertaken into decision-making by prospective HDR students, some of which is instructive for the present study. For example, Bowman (2005) interviewed 24 students entering a Masters degree course in the UK, finding that among all of her participants two 'status' factors were very important in the decision-making process; a desire to add to the prestige of their degree, and to 'further develop their own expertise within their subject area' (Bowman 2005:242). She also notes that her participants' decision-making did not 'fit the narrowly rational processes of economic calculation often assumed by policy', but were actually quite complicated, taking into account many factors (Bowman 2005:242. cf. Buchanan et al. 2006). My own survey sought to determine the relative weight prospective Honours students give to both educational and career outcomes when making a decision.

Other research, particularly in the US, has examined the role socio-economic status plays in access to graduate programs in US colleges (see Mullen et al. 2003; Stolzenburg 1994). Given that most places in Australian universities do not require the payment of expensive tuition fees (unlike graduate degrees in the US) it is reasonable to argue that economic constraints probably play a far less important role in Australian students' decision-making.

### **Method**

The data for this study were collected via an on-line survey hosted by the secure web-survey site SurveyMonkey.com. A total of 80 social science undergraduate students at one of Australia's Group of Eight universities completed the survey.

Forty-five of the participants were enrolled in a combined second and third year Sociology unit, while the remaining 35 were enrolled in a second/third year Criminology unit. Ninety-five percent of respondents were doing a Bachelor of Arts degree. Eighty percent of the survey respondents were majoring in a social science discipline (e.g. Sociology, Criminology, Anthropology, Behavioural Studies).

The mean age of survey respondents is 21 years. Eight-four percent of respondents were female, 16% male. This gender bias is typical of many humanities programs. In the faculty from which participants were recruited, 70% of undergraduate students are female and 30% are male.

This study has a convenience sample rather than a true random sample. While the data are not statistically generalisable to a larger population, they can provide sound anecdotal evidence of the kinds of things that are important to social science students when making decisions about Honours.

In order to recruit participants, the author and another colleague made announcements during lectures about the research project. As on-line generally surveys have the lowest response rate of any kind of survey (typically <30%) an incentive was offered to increase participation in the survey (the chance to win one of ten Apple iPod MP3 players). This particular strategy appeared to improve the overall response rate, which was approximately 35% of students enrolled in these units. The research was conducted with appropriate ethical approval from the human ethics committee at the author's university, and thus conforms to the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

The survey instrument asked students about their educational background, their university experience and their intentions once they finish their basic undergraduate degree. The results are discussed next.

### **Choosing Honours**

Seventeen percent of the sample said that they would *definitely* do Honours, while a further 50% agreed with the statement 'I am considering Honours, but haven't fully decided'. The other respondents were 'probably' or 'definitely' *not* going to do Honours. (In the remainder of this paper, respondents will be categorised into one of two groups – 'prospective Honours' students, and 'no to Honours' students.) (It is interesting here to observe that many more students stated that they are seriously considering Honours than actually take up the opportunity, a point discussed below.)

What factors are influential in the thinking of the 'prospective Honours' students? Past academic performance is a major factor in students' decision-making. Survey respondents were asked to self-report on the grades they typically get in their Bachelor of Arts units. Prospective Honours students were twice as likely as the 'no to

Honours' students to report receiving grades in the range of 70-100. Prospective students were also more likely than the no group to claim that they were 'very satisfied' with the quality of Arts units they have done. These findings are to be expected: Honours programs are designed for the elite students and only those who achieve the requisite Honours entry standard can apply.

In terms of educational background, the type of secondary school attended makes little difference as to whether a student was eligible for Honours; those who had gone to a government school were just as likely as those who had attended a private school to be a prospective Honours student. Prospective Honours students had on average, done better in their final year of school compared to the no group.

For those who are eligible, what factors are most important in their decision-making? Good teaching? The prospect of getting a better job? The prospective students were asked to rate various influences on Honours decision-making. They were presented with a list of 16 reasons why a person might choose Honours and asked to rate them on a Likert-type scale from 1-5, with 1 being 'not at all important' and 5 being 'very important'. These 16 reasons were quite varied, ranging from a desire to learn more about their major discipline, to the prospect of a better starting salary, to the camaraderie of working with other dedicated students. Some of the items are statements taken from various university Honours promotional websites. Does the promotional literature bear any resemblance to the reasons why students make their decision?

For ease of analysis and discussion, responses have been collapsed into three categories: 'not important' (those who rated an item 1 or 2), 'neither' (those who rated the item a 3) and 'important' (those who rated an item 4 or 5). Table 1 below shows the responses to each item.

**Table 1. Prospective Honours students: Importance of factors in Honours decision-making (percent of Prospective students)**

Factor	Level of importance			Total (%)
	Not imp. (1-2)	Neither (3)	Imp (4-5)	
To learn more about other areas of my major discipline	2%	6%	92%	100%
To enhance my employment opportunities	12%	6%	83%	100%
To add to the prestige of my degree	12%	6%	83%	100%
To study more deeply a particular area within my major discipline	4%	15%	82%	100%
I am looking for a sense of personal achievement	4%	19%	77%	100%
To improve my earning potential	8%	18%	73%	100%
To open doors to postgraduate study	13%	21%	66%	100%
I am looking for an intellectual challenge	8%	28%	64%	100%
To further develop my research and writing skills	11%	25%	63%	100%
The opportunity to conduct independent research	19%	30%	51%	100%
The camaraderie of working with other dedicated students	22%	32%	45%	100%
To work intensively with an expert supervisor	12%	39%	39%	100%
I am yet to decide about my career choice	36%	23%	31%	100%
Because I have received good grades in my major discipline	19%	41%	29%	100%
I am not ready to seek employment	52%	25%	22%	100%
Encouraged by a lecturer or tutor to think about Honours	51%	30%	18%	100%

Note: Percentages in rows may not add to 100 because of rounding, or because small proportions of responses have been omitted. How to read this table: this table shows 'row percentages' –for example 83% of prospective Honours students rated the item 'To enhance my employment opportunities' as 4 or 5, 6% of respondents gave this item a rating of 3, and 12% rated it 1-2.

The responses in this table have been sorted in order of importance. Four factors stand out as being particularly influential in Honours decision-making among the prospective group. These are 'To enhance my employment opportunities' (83% rated this as 'important'), 'To add to the prestige of my degree' (83% rated this as 'important'), 'To learn more about other areas of my major discipline' (92% rated this as 'important') and 'To study more deeply a particular area within my major discipline' (82% rated this as 'important').

Two of the top-rated items are quite *pragmatic* – students are choosing Honours because they think that it will give them an advantage in the job market, and will generally add to the prestige of their degree. The other two top-rated items reflect *pedagogical* concerns: students hope Honours will develop their knowledge of their chosen discipline.

It appears that decision-making follows, to some extent, either a pedagogical or pragmatic path. The top two pedagogical reasons for choosing Honours (learning more about their discipline, study more deeply an area of the discipline) are strongly correlated with each other (Spearman's rank-order correlation,  $\rho=.532$ ,  $n=53$ ,  $p<000$ ). The top two pragmatic reasons (prestige of degree, enhance employment opportunities) are also strongly correlated with each other (Spearman's rank-order correlation,  $\rho=.612$ ,  $n=53$ ,  $p<000$ ). But the pragmatic/pedagogical correlations are significantly weaker. This suggests that prospective Honours students tend towards two groups: those focussed more on the career outcomes, and those more interested in the learning outcomes. Consequently, promotional strategies for Honours should equally emphasise both outcomes from doing the Honours year. What ranks as important for some students is a lower priority for others.

Also instructive is the list of items that were not important factors in Prospective student's decision-making. Few students nominated encouragement from a lecturer or tutor as a factor. The prospect of being able to do independent research, or working with an expert supervisor does not appear to be particularly influential either.

## Not choosing Honours

The students who indicated they would not do Honours were presented with a list of reasons why students might not choose Honours and asked to nominate whether this was 'not a reason', a 'part reason' or a 'reason'. Results are in table 2 below.

**Table 2. 'No' to Honours students: Reasons for not doing Honours (percent of students)**

Reason	Level of influence			
	No	Partly	Yes	Total (%)
I want to seek paid work now rather than do more study at this stage	24%	19%	57%	100%
My grades are not or probably will not be sufficient to be admitted into Honours	24%	38%	38%	100%
I intend to do another course after I complete my Bachelor's degree	38%	24%	38%	100%
I don't really know what Honours involves	19%	53%	29%	100%
I want to travel/work overseas when I complete my Bachelor's degree	48%	28%	24%	100%
I don't know the requirements for entry into the Honours program	43%	38%	19%	100%
I am just not interested in Honours	38%	43%	19%	100%
I have not enjoyed university study	76%	14%	10%	100%
I am doing a double degree (e.g. BA/LLB) and want to finish the other component	81%	10%	10%	100%
I do not want to accrue any more debt from my studies (e.g. HECS-Help, FEE-HELP debt)	81%	10%	10%	100%
It is too early to decide	71%	19%	10%	100%
The conduct or attitude of some teaching staff has not been encouraging	76%	19%	5%	100%
I have a paid position awaiting when I finish my study, so I can't do another year of study	90%	5%	5%	100%
My major area of study was too difficult academically	86%	10%	5%	100%
I am not satisfied with the quality of staff in my major area or areas of study	85%	14%	-	100%

Note: Percentages in rows may not add to 100 because of rounding, or because small proportions of responses have been omitted. This table shows 'row percentages'.

Here we can see that students choose not to do Honours for mainly pragmatic reasons: they want to seek paid work (76% said this was a reason, or part reason – collapsing these two categories), their grades were not good enough (76% said this was a reason, or part reason), they wanted to do another kind of study afterwards (62% said this was a reason, or part reason), or they simply don't know what Honours involves (82% said

this was a reason, or part reason). Little can be done about these, except for the last one. It is clear that a reasonable number of students simply don't know enough about Honours. Informing students early and often about Honours ought to be a priority in future promotional strategies.

The survey results also suggest that many more students seriously consider Honours than actually take up the opportunity. These students are suitably qualified, but other things are clearly proving attractive in the time between finishing the pass degree and enrolling in Honours. Further research – particularly qualitative interviews – might provide insights into how pass degree students resolve that various options open to them and what factors draw them away from Honours.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has considered some of the important factors in undergraduate student's thinking about whether or not to do Honours. Those who are thinking about doing Honours are seeking to get something intellectual or practical out of the extra year's study.

University promotion of Honours often emphasises the fact that it is a key pathway to HDR and independent research, but these reasons do not figure prominently in the thinking of prospective Honours students. Among students themselves, we see different priorities: for many, importantly, doing Honours is about 'becoming' a sociologist or criminologist, rather than simply becoming qualified.

The data for this sample came from an Australian Group of Eight (GO8) university, which has an extensive Honours program and promotes it widely. Further research, conducted at smaller universities, particularly those with a more vocational or applied focus, might reveal different priorities among the prospective Honours students.

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