



MANUAL FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE  
OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

HONOURS PROGRAMME

Version 2019

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

A group of students are looking for the opportunity to achieve even more during their course. As well as academic 'curiosity', another key motivating factor for these students is the chance to improve their career prospects, both in education and in the job market. They are keen for their extra efforts and results to be recognized and appreciated. The university can facilitate this in several different ways:

## *Higher grades (cum laude)*

The traditional way for students to distinguish themselves is to achieve higher grades for the course components they take. Students' grades are stated on the diploma supplement. The distinction of cum laude acknowledges these students' extra achievement. Students are clearly proud of graduating with honours, as evidenced by the fact that they are keen to state the distinction of cum laude on their CVs.

## *Extra courses, minors or double majors*

Students have the option to take extra subjects to earn extra credits. That could entail standalone courses, an extra minor or taking a second Bachelor's or Master's programme alongside their first choice. The extra effort and achievement are recognized in the addition of the extra courses and grades to the diploma supplement or by being awarded a second diploma. It is not the teaching itself that is focused on excellence in the case of a cum laude or double major; it is the student him or herself who excels.

## *Disciplines with a higher final level of proficiency (honours courses)*

Final attainment levels have been set for every course within a degree programme, and are derived from the final attainment levels for the programme as a whole. Faculties also have the option to supplement these achievement goals with courses with a more demanding final level of proficiency, known as honours courses, whether as standalone subjects or as more demanding honours tracks. Students must make a greater investment in their studies in order to achieve this higher final level of proficiency. That extra effort is demonstrated in the number of credits available for an honours course. Together with the extra achievement, this effort is also recognized by listing honours courses separately on the diploma supplement.

Achieving high grades and taking two majors or extra courses are not standard features of the curriculum; it is the student him or herself who excels and puts in the extra effort. An Honours Programme, on the other hand, offers education at a higher level that requires students to show their quality, and students are expected to excel.

This chapter discusses the Honours Programme at VU Amsterdam. The chapter explains the objective, describes the people and bodies involved and what their duties are, and formulates the quality requirements for the Honours Programme.

## 2 VU AMSTERDAM HONOURS PROGRAMME

### 2.1 THE VU-UvA HONOURS PROGRAMME

In 2013, the Executive Boards of VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam decided to create a joint programme that would promote excellence in undergraduate education. This resulted in the VU-UvA Honours Programme. Highly motivated students at both institutions have the opportunity to distinguish themselves by following an extra programme in addition to their regular Bachelor's curriculum.

The Honours Programme consists of both honours courses within the students' own faculty and interdisciplinary (inter-faculty) honours courses offered by both VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam. Students choose a programme worth 30 credits, consisting of at least 12 credits' worth of honours courses within their own discipline and at least 12 credits of interdisciplinary honours courses. The choices available to students are published on both institutions' websites.

The faculty modules may comprise separate courses, offered within the discipline but specially developed for the Honours Programme; alternatively, regular undergraduate units may also be enriched with an added honours component. When a student successfully completes an enriched undergraduate module, the student will receive the regular number of credits, plus the honours credits.

The interdisciplinary honours teaching is offered at an inter-faculty level and is available to honours students at both VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam. Honours students can also choose to take subjects at the Amsterdam University College (AUC). These modules are considered to be interdisciplinary and taught at an honours level.

If the student meets all the requirements of the VU-UvA Honours Programme, he or she will receive an Honours Degree.

### 2.2 VU-UvA COLLABORATION

The added value of the VU-UvA Honours Programme for students is determined in part by the reputation achieved both nationally and internationally by the VU-UvA Honours Programme. A reliable form of quality control, focused on guaranteeing the programme's joint standards, is therefore indispensable. To this end, VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam are protective of the key terms 'honours course', 'honours programme', 'honours student' and 'honours degree'. The joint nature of the partnership between VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam is expressed in:

- the use of an identical set of admissions requirements for the Honours Programme;
- an identical set of requirements and standards to achieve an Honours Degree;

- shared requirements and standards for honours courses;
- opening the interdisciplinary (inter-faculty) range of honours courses to students from both institutions.

The shared features are set out in the VU-UvA Honours Programme Regulation (latest version: October 2018), which has been adopted by both Executive Boards.

## 2.3 VU-UvA HONOURS CONSULTATION

Coordination between both institutions is achieved through the VU-UvA Honours Consultation. The members of the Honours Consultation come together at least twice a year to strengthen the programme and the links between the institutions and to guarantee the shared components described above. The Honours Consultation safeguards the diversity of the joint range of modules, the visibility of these modules and the Honours Programme and the cost-benefit balance between the institutions. Both institutions are represented on the Consultation by – at a minimum – the dean responsible, a coordinator from the Honours Programme and an honours student. Amsterdam University College's Director of Education also joins the consultation. The chair and administrative support are rotated between the institutions on an annual basis.

## 2.4 VU AMSTERDAM HONOURS COMMITTEE

The VU Amsterdam Honours Programme has an internal VU Amsterdam Honours Committee chaired by the dean responsible (*Dean of Talent*). The other members include two academics (in a personal capacity), a representative of the USC, an honours student and the honours coordinator. Administrative support is provided by the policy officer either from Student & Educational Affairs or from the Department of Educational Policy, Quality Assurance and Process Management whose portfolio includes talent policy. The duties of the VU Amsterdam Honours Committee are laid out in Chapter 2.3.

### 3 OBJECTIVE, PARTICIPANTS AND DUTIES

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVE

The Honours Programme is intended for students who want to distinguish themselves by taking an extra programme in addition to their regular undergraduate studies. In order to be admitted to the programme, by the end of the first year of their undergraduate programme students must have completed all first-year modules and achieved a minimum average grade of 7.5, and they must be motivated to take extra courses in the second and third years of the programme. In exceptional cases, a student who does not quite meet the above requirements may be admitted on a 'wild card'. The Examination Board of the student's regular programme determines whether a wild card may be issued.

First-year Bachelor's students may take an inter-faculty honours course in the second semester of their first year, on condition that they have successfully completed all the first-semester courses with a minimum average grade of 7.5. First-year students may only take honours courses that are open to first-year students. Taking an honours course in the first year does not guarantee admission to the Honours Programme. However, a completed course can be counted towards the Honours Programme if the student is admitted to the Honours Programme at the end of the first year.

The Honours Programme is made up of 30 credits of units offered within the student's own faculty and interdisciplinary (inter-faculty) units which demand a higher final level of proficiency than regular undergraduate courses and which are more academic. The students themselves choose their programme, on condition that it consists of at least 12 credits' worth of honours units within their own discipline and at least 12 credits of interdisciplinary honours units.

A student who has met the requirements of the regular Bachelor's programme within the prescribed duration of study, who has achieved an average weighted mark of at least 7.5 for all components of the Bachelor's programme (excluding Honours Programme courses) and who has also successfully completed the Honours Programme will receive an *Honours Degree*. The honours courses are listed as such on the student's diploma supplement. The Examination Board may grant permission to deviate from the prescribed duration of study in the event of unusual personal circumstances, or if the student's regular course of study has been delayed as a result of an approved overseas study programme or work placement.

Students who have distinguished themselves by their greater achievements in other areas have the option to list their extra achievements on the diploma supplement, but they are not eligible for an Honours Degree. Interdisciplinary honours courses that broaden students' experience are a core component of the Honours Programme; achievements which lack this component cannot therefore be designated as 'honours'.

### 3.2 WHO IS INVOLVED?

- Honours students
- The VU Amsterdam Honours Committee
- The Faculty Board
- Examination Boards
- Faculty Honours Coordinators
- VU Amsterdam's central Honours Coordinator
- Extensus, the student association for honours students at VU Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam University College
- Honours Programme Student Council

### 3.3 DUTIES OF THOSE INVOLVED

Students can register for the Honours Programme using the application form on the [VU Amsterdam website](#), as can first-year students who would like to take an honours course during the second semester. Students who have been admitted to the Honours Programme can register for faculty honours courses on the website of the faculty in question. Students must use a registration form to register for inter-faculty courses.

The VU Amsterdam Honours Committee has the following duties:<sup>1</sup>

- a. develop a vision for Honours education;
- b. advise the Executive Board, whether on request or on their own initiative, about developments in honours education at VU Amsterdam;
- c. supervise, encourage and initiate a diverse, interdisciplinary range of honours courses at VU Amsterdam, partly based on students' interests and coordinated with the range offered by the University of Amsterdam;
- d. test whether faculty courses achieve the more demanding final level of proficiency, and ensure that the awarding of honours credits to regular undergraduate courses is harmonized wherever that is desirable;
- e. following consultation, delegate the quality assurance of the inter-faculty honours courses to a coordinating degree programme;
- f. provide the annual institutional reports to the VU-UvA Honours Consultation as part of the joint annual reporting to both Executive Boards;
- g. take responsibility for publishing the range of available honours courses on the website.

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<sup>1</sup> The VU Amsterdam Honours Committee has been in place since October 2018. Its duties and responsibilities will be further crystallized over the course of 2019.

A policy officer from Student & Educational Affairs or the Department of Educational Policy, Quality Assurance and Process Management is appointed secretary of the VU Amsterdam Honours Committee and of the VU-UvA Honours Consultation (rotating with the policy officer from the University of Amsterdam). He or she supports the dean responsible (Dean of Talent) in his or her duties for the Honours Programme.

The Faculty Board establishes which courses in the faculty's prospectus meet the standards for an honours course, as well as other ways in which students can achieve honours credits, and informs the VU Amsterdam Honours Committee of the resulting components.

The Examination Board of the student's regular programme determines whether the student may be admitted to the Honours Programme. The Examination Board assesses requests for extensions to the duration of the Bachelor's programme (extension of the prescribed duration of study) and the Honours Programme, and has ultimate responsibility for determining whether a student is eligible for an Honours Degree. The Examination Board under which the honours courses fall reviews the levels reached by the students in both honours courses within their disciplines and interdisciplinary honours courses, for example by appointing a second examiner as standard to supplement the instructor(s) responsible. The Examination Board reports to the VU Amsterdam Honours Committee on the way in which the honours credits are awarded.

The faculty contact for the Honours Programme coordinates the range of courses on the various degree programmes within the faculty and aligns the faculty's range of courses with the inter-faculty honours education through the central Honours Coordinator. He or she offers students information about the Honours Programme and the faculty's honours courses.

The central VU Amsterdam Honours Coordinator coordinates the inter-faculty range of honours courses and the registration on these courses of first-year students and students at VU Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam University College. The Honours Coordinator promotes honours education and coordinates the honours degree ceremony.

The association of honours students, *Extensus Honours Association*, is open to honours students and alumni of the Honours Programme at VU Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam University College. The association organizes professional, academic and social activities for its members registered to the programme; visit <http://extensus.org/> for more information.

The Honours Programme Student Council represents the students who have been admitted to the Honours Programme and advises the central and faculty Honours Coordinators and the VU-UvA Honours Consultation.



## 4 QUALITY REQUIREMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 QUALITY REQUIREMENTS FOR THE VU AMSTERDAM HONOURS DEGREE

In order to be eligible to receive an Honours Degree from VU Amsterdam, a student must meet the following criteria:

- The student must have been selected to participate in the Honours Programme (see section 4.2: quality requirements for Honour students;)
- In addition to the regular Bachelor's programme, the student must make the additional effort required to achieve at least 30 credits in recognized honours courses and/or the components of regular Bachelor's courses which have been approved by the Committee and whose final attainment levels have been raised.
- Of the aforementioned extra effort, at least 12 credits must be achieved through recognized interdisciplinary (inter-faculty) honours courses and at least 12 credits through recognized honours courses within the student's own discipline;
- The student must have completed his or her Bachelor's degree within the prescribed duration of study;
- The student must have achieved a weighted average grade of at least 7.5 for all Bachelor's courses.

#### Explanatory notes

To obtain an Honours Degree, students must achieve both 180 regular credits and 30 credits in recognized honours courses. The recognized honours courses are offered separately from the regular Bachelor's programme. If a student wishes to obtain an Honours Degree, these courses will not count towards his or her regular curriculum. Honours courses are only intended to be taken by honours students.<sup>2</sup> If an honours student decides not to complete the Honours Programme, any completed honours courses may be counted towards his or her elective credits or free-choice component. The Examination Board in question must always approve this credit allocation, unless otherwise stated in the relevant Academic and Examination Regulations.

Faculty honours courses may also be regular Bachelor's courses to which an honours component has been added. Students who complete this added component will pass the course at a demonstrably higher (honours) level. Students receive the regular number of credits for each of these courses; a number of 'honours credits' – determined in advance<sup>3</sup> – are added in recognition of the extra effort the student made to complete the course at an honours level. In contrast with teaching that is specifically related to the honours component, these courses are open to all students.

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<sup>2</sup> Under certain conditions, other students, including first-year students, may also take part in these courses.

<sup>3</sup> In practice, the more demanding courses or components often have a separate subject code.

## 4.2 QUALITY REQUIREMENTS FOR HONOURS STUDENTS

In order to be recognized as an honours student, and hence to be admitted to the Honours Programme, a student must satisfy one of the following criteria:

- He or she must have achieved 60 credits with a weighted average grade of 7.5 for the first year of the Bachelor's programme;
- He or she must have been assigned a 'wild card'; the faculty Examination Board has the power to admit students to the Honours Programme on the basis of their personal achievements. If desired, in addition to the above criteria, a faculty may also include a student's intrinsic motivation when deciding whether to admit that student. This motivation may be expressed in the form of an interview, a letter and/or a specific assignment.

## 4.3 QUALITY REQUIREMENTS FOR VU AMSTERDAM HONOURS COURSES

Characteristics of honours courses include:

- Students achieve a demonstrably higher level;
- Courses may be intended to broaden students' horizons (interdisciplinary) or to go into greater depth in students' own disciplines (disciplinary);
- Courses are clearly separate, research-intensive honours courses;
- The language of instruction is English, unless the content of the course requires it to be taught in a different language.

The higher level of honours courses must be demonstrated by the following characteristics:

- the substantive quality of the programme;
- the challenging content of the teaching methods;
- the creative, pioneering content of the programme;
- a focus on academic competences;
- an intersection of intellectual, social and personal development;
- the intensity and meaningful quality of students' contact with instructors and visiting lecturers;
- where applicable: additional admissions criteria (essential prior knowledge).
- These requirements apply to all honours courses, meaning that they are also applicable to the more demanding component added to regular courses, for which honours credits can be awarded.

### Accessibility of honours courses

*In-depth/disciplinary honours courses* may also be opened up to non-honours students, as long as these students satisfy the general entry requirements of the Honours Programme; the decision

about whether to open up these courses is reserved to the faculty in question. If a course is oversubscribed, honours students take precedence.

*Interdisciplinary (inter-faculty) honours courses* are reserved for honours students. These courses may only be opened up to other students if not all places have been filled. These students must satisfy the general terms and conditions for admission to the Honours Programme. First-year students who intend to take an honours course in the second semester must have completed the first semester within the prescribed duration, with an average grade of 7.5. First-year students who satisfy the criteria may only take part in the inter-faculty courses which have been specifically opened up to first-year students, on condition that there are sufficient places available.

The honours courses which have been completed successfully are listed as such on the diploma supplement.

#### 4.4 QUALITY REQUIREMENTS FOR THE VU-UVA COLLABORATION

- VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam use an identical set of requirements and standards to award an Honours Degree;
- VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam use an identical set of requirements and standards for honours courses;
- VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam use an identical set of admission and graduation requirements for the Honours Programme;
- Both universities' honours courses are open to students from both universities. Participation in VU Amsterdam courses by University of Amsterdam students may be restricted if this is no longer in proportion to VU Amsterdam students' participation in University of Amsterdam courses, and vice versa.
- These requirements enable VU Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam to protect the terms 'honours course', 'honours programme', 'honours student' and 'honours degree'.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.5 QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR HONOURS COURSES

VU Amsterdam must guarantee that an Honours Degree confers a distinction when the university awards such an Honours Degree. It is extremely important to supervise the quality of the programme as a whole, the admission and graduation requirements and the level of the honours courses. This role is partly fulfilled by the VU Amsterdam Honours Committee which, together with the University of Amsterdam, is responsible for ensuring compliance with an identical set of requirements and standards. Wherever possible, quality assurance for honours courses and honours credits is in line with the regular quality assurance. The quality assurance of the honours courses within the student's own discipline is the responsibility of the faculty; these courses form part of the education provided by the faculty. The quality assurance of the interdisciplinary courses

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<sup>4</sup> Leading to a joint description of an honours course and an Honours Degree on the diploma supplement.

is more complex; these honours courses do not form part of any existing programme and are interdisciplinary by nature. A coordinating faculty has been designated to provide the quality assurance of these courses, at least for now;<sup>5</sup> in principle, the coordinating faculty is the faculty within which the principal instructor is appointed.

In terms of quality assurance, this concerns:

- The more demanding/higher requirements for the final attainment levels which the honours courses and honours credits offered must satisfy; this also applies to the individual courses to which an honours component has been added, as well as to the more demanding requirements for the Bachelor's thesis if the more demanding part of the thesis is used for (the faculty component of) the Honours Programme;
- The supervision of the quality of the assessment (including the assessment of the dissertations at an honours level);
- The admission of students to the Honours Programme (insofar as this relates to deviations from the criteria that would ordinarily be applicable).

The specific character of honours courses is expressed in the recognition of honours courses by the VU Amsterdam Honours Committee and their publication as such on the website. The potential other – recognized – ways to achieve honours credits are also published on the website.

- The Examination Boards under which the honours courses fall are explicitly responsible for reviewing the levels reached by the students both in honours courses within their disciplines and in interdisciplinary honours courses, for example by appointing a second examiner as standard to supplement the instructor(s) responsible.
- The Faculty Board/dean establishes which courses from the faculty's range meet the standards for an honours course, as well as other ways for students to earn honours credits. The Board informs the VU Amsterdam Honours Committee of the resulting components;
- On the basis of the course description, the VU Amsterdam Honours Committee checks whether the course or the regulation satisfies the relevant requirements and whether it can be included in the VU-UvA register of honours courses;
- Boards of Examiners are requested to put in place a regulation to review the level achieved by students on honours courses and the other ways for students to gain honours credits, and to report on these aspects to the joint VU-UvA Honours Committee. This framework assigns responsibility for the quality assurance for interdisciplinary honours courses to the faculty within which the principal instructor is appointed.

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<sup>5</sup> The VU Amsterdam Honours Committee is working on a new system of quality assurance for inter-faculty honours courses in 2019.