

The Future of Honours

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Arts, Social Sciences
and Humanities

About DASSH

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities represents more than 250 Deans and Associate and Deputy Deans from nearly every university in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Our members lead schools that are home to more than 100,000 students and thousands of researchers in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities.

We advocate for our disciplines, produce research and policy submissions, and engage with government, members and colleagues in Australia and around the world. DASSH is a hub for members, with networking and professional development events held throughout the year.

Acknowledgement of First Nations

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities proudly acknowledges First Nations people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely. We acknowledge the powerful opportunity our sector has to embrace, learn from and improve through better understanding and integration of Indigenous Knowledges.

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Acknowledgement

This research was conceived by the leaders of the DASSH 2024 Special Interest Group on the future of the Honours program. They were assisted by Rebekah Harms and Ellen Kirkpatrick from DASSH.

DASSH is grateful to the leadership group for the work they have done on this project.

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Executive Summary

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) represents more than 250 Deans and Associate Deputy Deans from 44 institutions across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Our members lead schools that are home to more than 100 000 students and several thousand scholars in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities.

We advocate for our disciplines, produce research and policy submissions, engage with government, members and colleagues around the world. DASSH is a hub for members with networking and professional development events held throughout the year.

DASSH established two new Special Interest Groups in 2024, one of which centred on the future of the Honours program. It brought together four senior leaders from member universities who have led this project.

To gain a clearer understanding of the current and future directions for the Honours program, leaders of the Special Interest Group Professor Kath Gelber, Professor Alexandra Ludewig, Professor Kristin Natalier and Professor Thea Blackler, conducted a survey of Honours students and convenors across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

Honours education is understood variously as a program, experience and qualification. Honours programs are student-focused and emphasise independent research and learning. The Honours program differs across disciplines and institutions. In the Australian and Aotearoa higher education setting, it typically involves proposing a question or concept which is explored in an extended research project alongside some seminar components variously referred to as coursework, units or credits.

The surveys of Honours students and convenors across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand were distributed by DASSH to member universities in August 2024. They were sent directly to course convenors within humanities, arts and social sciences disciplines across Australia and Aotearoa who then shared the survey with students.

In total, 134 Honours students and 57 Honours convenors completed the surveys which involved both qualitative and quantitative questions which aimed at understanding the characteristics and motivations of those undertaking Honours degrees as well as the structure of current Honours programs. The survey data was analysed through a mix of statistical and thematic analysis.

The results of the survey indicated that the vast majority of students (72 per cent) were studying Honours full-time. Demographic data also showed that most Honours students were female (57 per cent) and between the ages of 20 and 24 (56 per cent). Top disciplines for students responding to the survey included Philosophy, English, Ancient History/Classics and History, and Languages/Linguistics/Translation Studies.

Most students enrolled in their Honours degree for intellectual interest, curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge.

When asked about the purpose of Honours, students' responses could be grouped around a number of themes, including:

- Knowledge extension
- Training
- Chance to do independent research
- Pathway to higher level study
- Self-actualisation
- Enhance job prospects
- Relational aspects

Honours convenors revealed that the structure and proportion of the Honours program was primarily either:

- 50 per cent coursework and 50 per cent thesis, or
- 30 per cent disciplinary coursework, 30 per cent methods, 40 per cent thesis.

Forty-seven per cent of respondents revealed their institution does not offer an embedded Honours program. Fourteen per cent said their institution does offer an embedded Honours program. The remainder did not respond to the question.

Forty-six per cent of convenors expressed interest in cross-institutional collaboration, although there was a significant degree of hesitancy expressed regarding the obstacles that would need to be overcome to make this work.

The results of this study provide insight into the characteristics of the Honours degree which can provide a benchmark for future studies and conversations. The results were discussed extensively at the 2024 DASSH Conference in Adelaide and key insights from that conversation have been shared in this report.

Historical Context

The Australian Honours program evolved from the United Kingdom's (UK) 19th century model characterised by intellectual inquiry and pursuit of knowledge. With the growth of the Australian higher education sector, Honours is now widely regarded as an academic pathway to postgraduate and doctoral education programs.

In Australia, Honours is generally a one or two-year research program after the completion or in the final year of Bachelors. This differs from the credit-based system more common in the UK and wider European bachelor's degrees.

Entry into Honours programs requires high-level academic performance in the relevant area. Aotearoa, Scotland and also South Africa may be the only other systems that have a similar qualification to the Australian Honours program. They are all selective and aim to prepare students for further postgraduate research.



Surveys

Surveys of currently enrolled Honours students and Honours convenors

DASSH emailed members to ask for names of Honours convenors and then emailed respondents with a request to send the survey on to students.

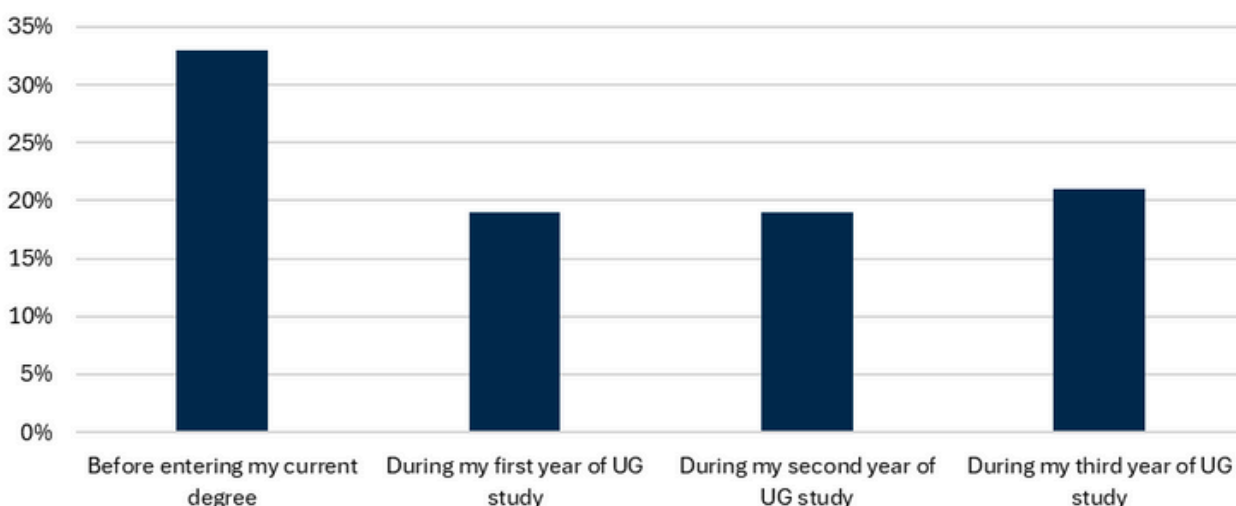
We received primary ethics approval from Flinders University (#7561) and secondary ethics approval from UQ (2024/HE001467) and QUT (approval number 8941). Qualtrics:

- Student survey, n=134
- Honours convenor survey, n=57

We have included results from those who attempted to complete the survey but did not answer all questions, so not all results add up to 100 per cent

Results | Students

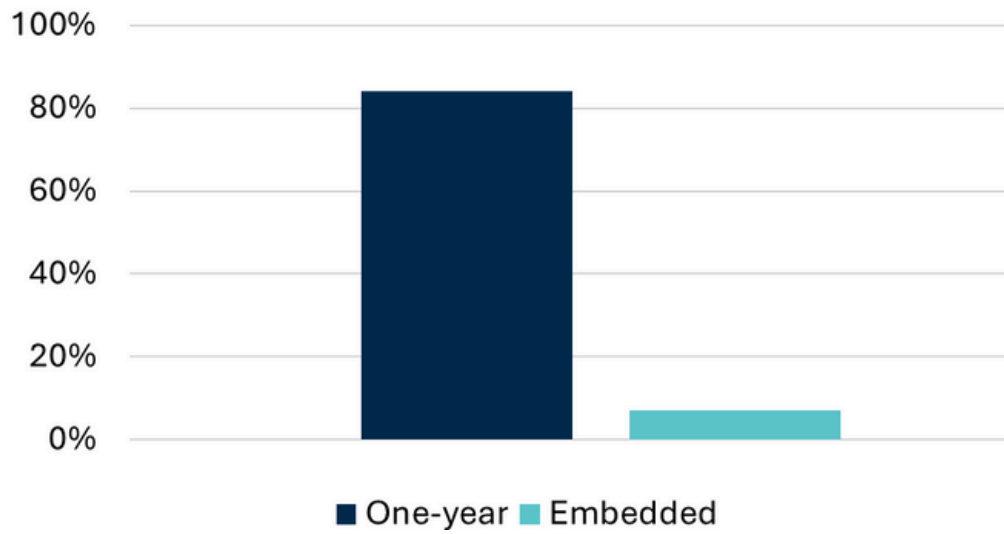
When did you become aware of the possibility of studying Honours?



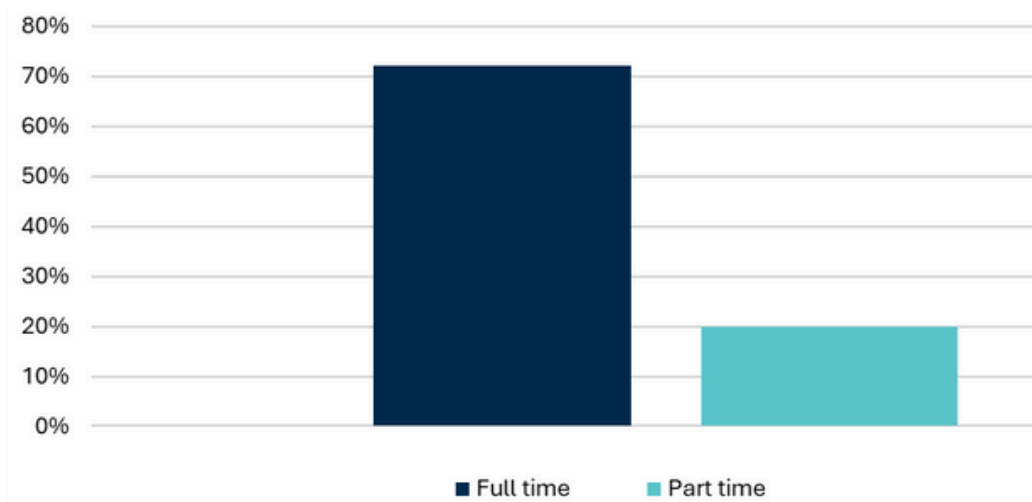
In which discipline are you studying Honours?

Ancient History/Classics	11	English	13	Media/Communications	7
Animation & Game Design	1	Environmental Human	1	Music	4
Anthropology	6	Film	1	Philosophy	14
Archaeology	7	Fine Art	4	Politics	1
Art History	6	French	2	Public Policy	1
Arts/Humanities	8	German	1	Religious Studies	1
Asian Studies	2	History	10	Sociology	3
Creative Writing	7	Italian	1	Translation	1
Criminology	1	Justice Studies	2	Visual Arts	3
Drama	2	Korean	1	Western Civilisations	1
Economics	5	Linguistics	4		

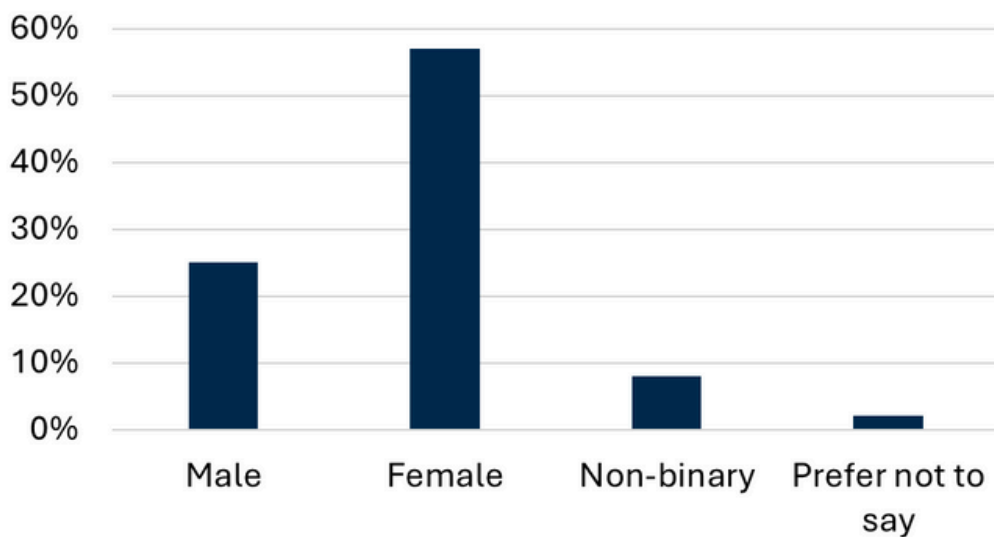
Are you taking a one-year program or embedded Honours?



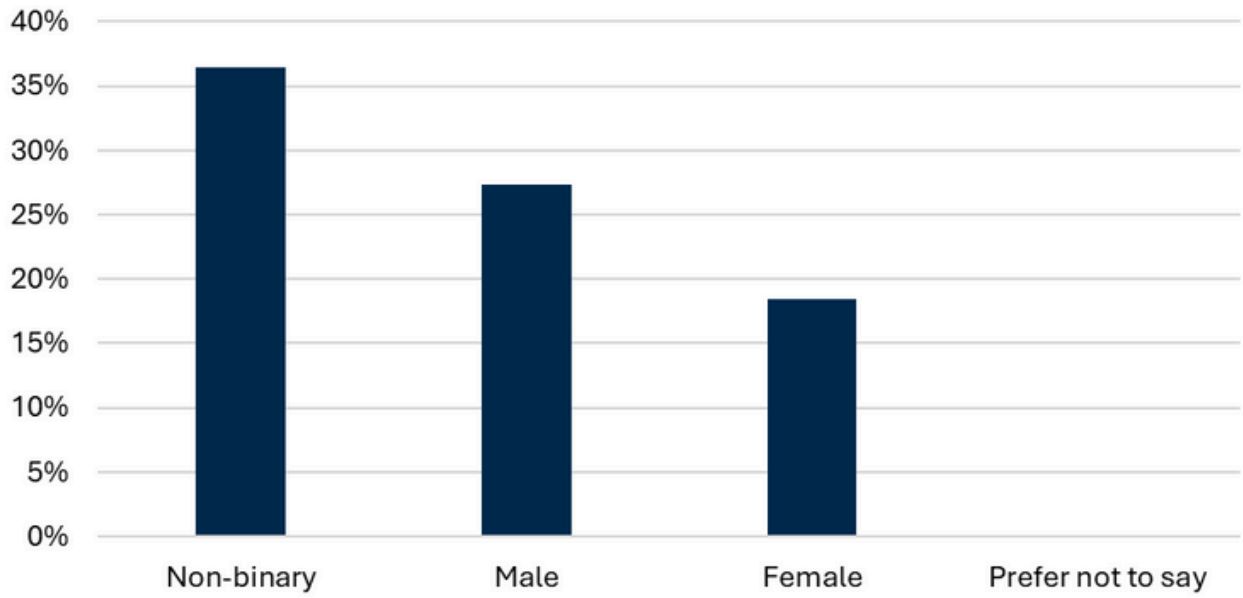
Are you studying full time or part time?



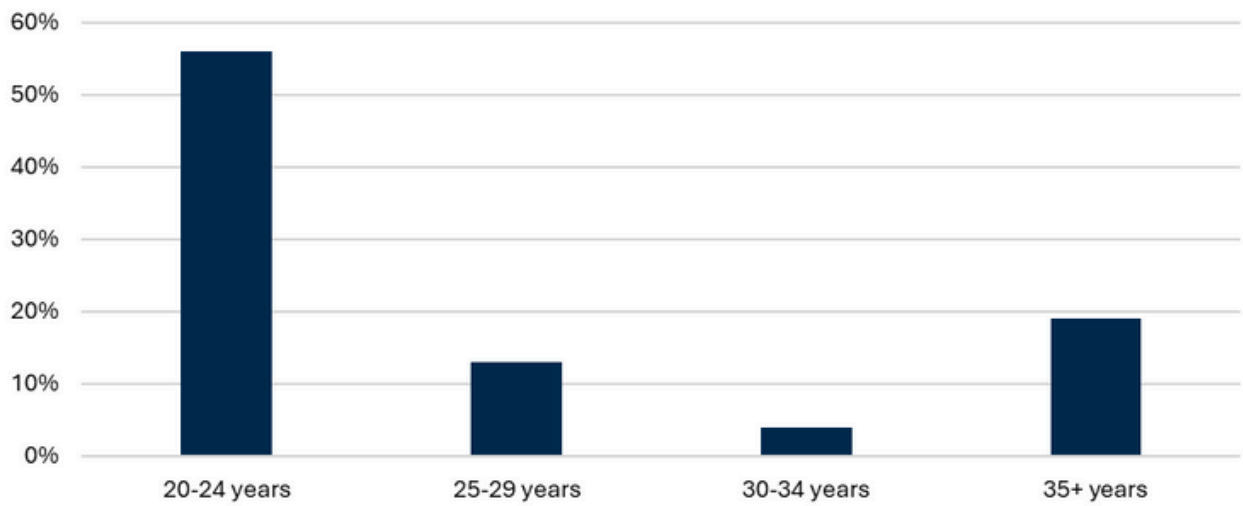
What is your gender identity?



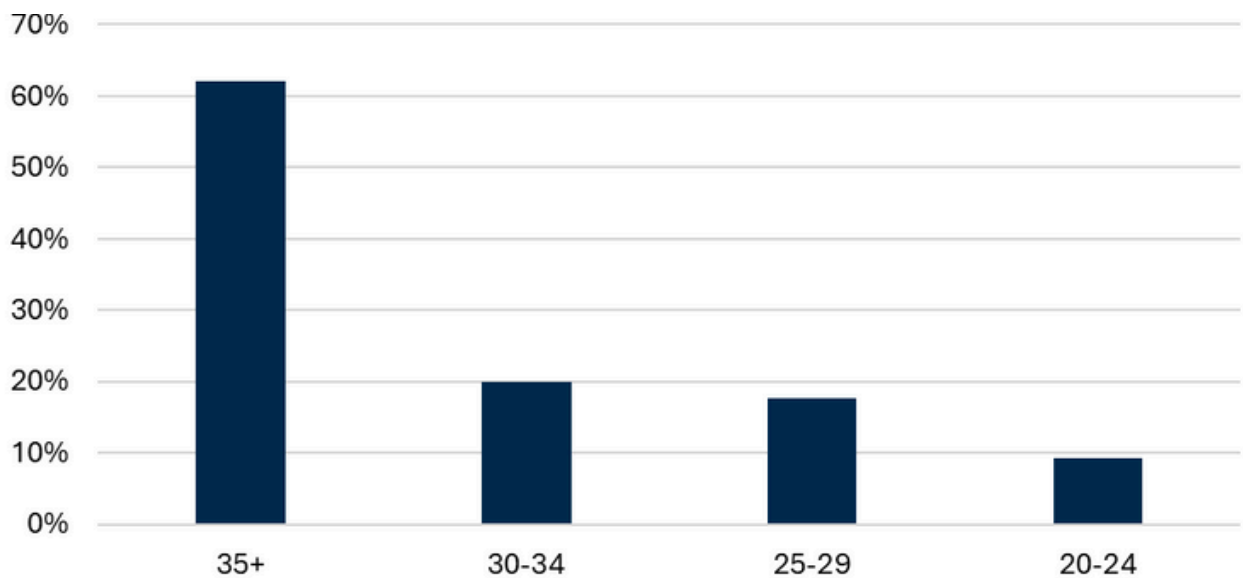
Part-time by gender



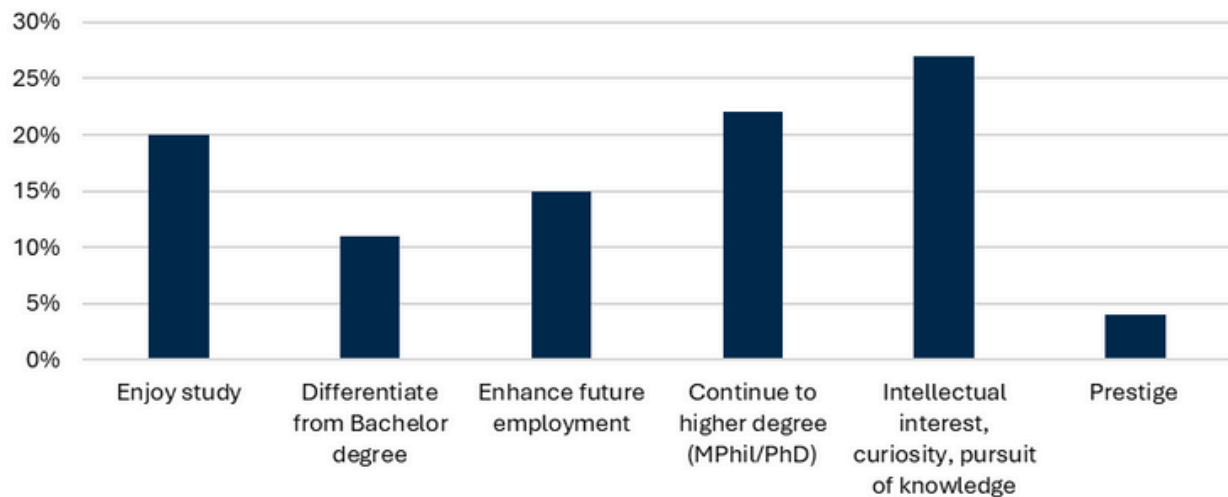
What is your age bracket?



Part-time by age



Why did you enrol in Honours?



What do you see as the purpose of Honours?

Knowledge Extension

Going beyond the Bachelor degree by undertaking further study through researching a topic of interest in depth, with guidance from knowledgeable staff

To exercise, sharpen, and grow in research, critical thinking, problem solving, and independent thinking skills

To specialise in the discipline of choice after a more general undergraduate degree

To learn more about the topic I'm interested in, challenge myself, and enhance my [future prospects](#)

Training

To provide me with the rigorous technical training to not only pursue post-graduate study, but to properly equip me with the tools to become an XXX

Learning how to research and understanding the importance of research in our world

A chance to gain extra practical training

Chance to do independent research

Develop the ability for independent research and learn the skills of academic writing

Demonstrate ability to conduct self-guided research

Expanding my independent research skills

Pathway to higher level study

To further develop and enhance academic skillsets that are required for postgraduate studies; to gain insight into the academic processes that accompany producing large-scale academic works

As a stepping stone to higher level research degree

Self-actualisation

To prove to myself that even at 67yrs of age you can be part of such a great institution and enjoy learning

For me it was a chance to test out whether I enjoyed a longer-form research project

To pursue a project of pure personal passion for at least one time in life

A quiet and safe place to slow down and enjoy university life

Enhance job prospects

To make me more competitive in the job market

To meet the minimum level requirement for my profession

Sets you apart from other job applicants, enables you to learn research skills, and gives you freedom in choosing your research project

Relational

Cementing my previous learning and the opportunity to have time with my supervisor who has helped my studies and support the evolution of my talents from raw to quite special

Learning more about the field as it is a vital field going into the future of society



Results | Conveners

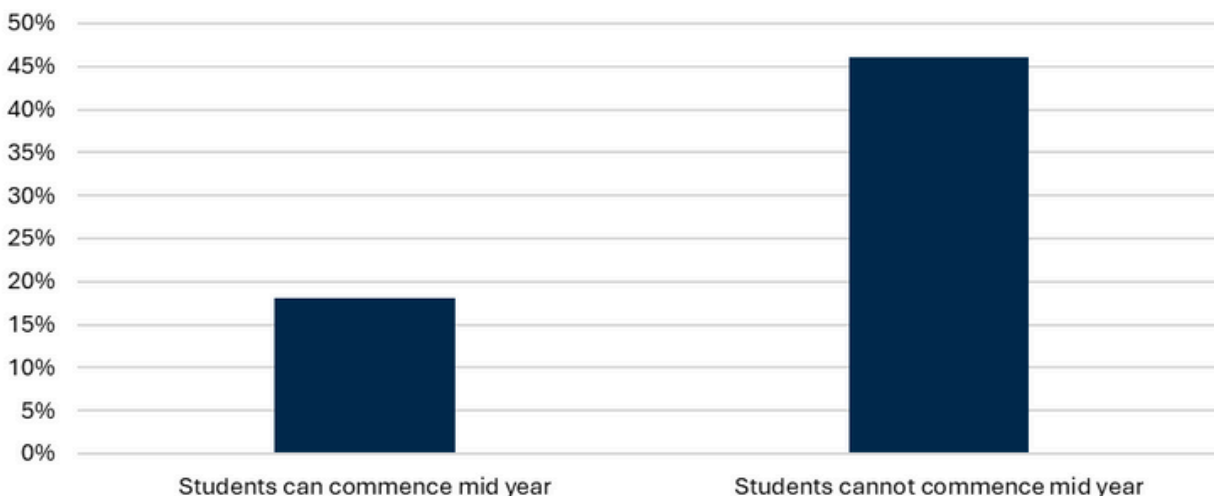
In which disciplines do you offer end-on Honours as a discrete area of study?



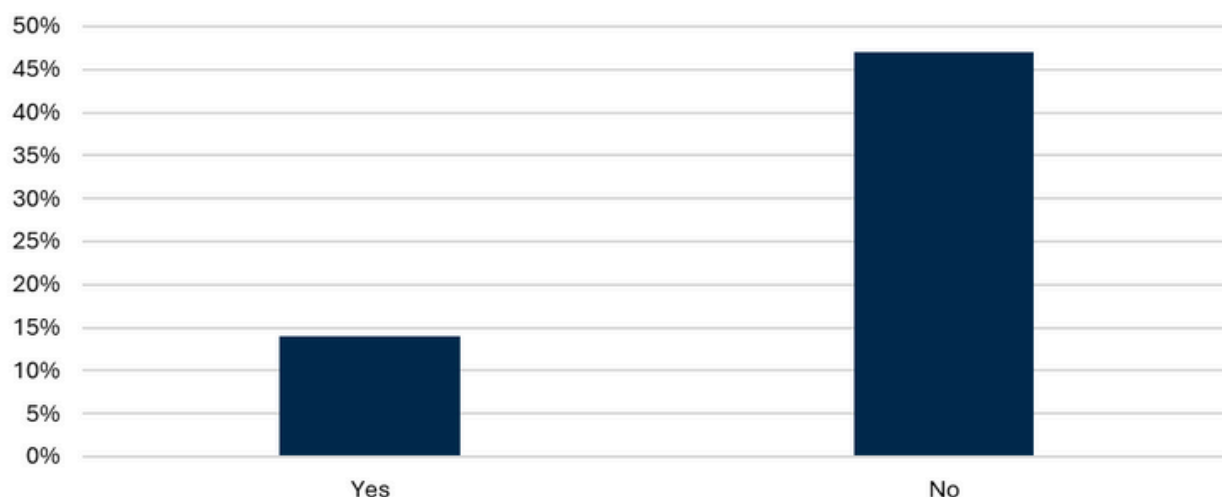
What is the structure and proportion of the program?

- 50 per cent coursework and 50 per cent thesis, or
- 30 per cent disciplinary coursework, 30 per cent methods, 40 per cent thesis.

Can students commence mid-year?



Do you have embedded Honours programs?



Do you encourage students into a Masters pathway instead of Honours?

Several encourage students to choose between Honours and Masters and highlight the pros and cons of both options.

“ There are Masters pathways as alternatives to Honours. We explain the pros and cons of the two pathways and encourage students with a leaning towards doing a PhD to take the Honours pathway ”

Encouragement to do Masters is sometimes aptitude-based

“ If they show aptitude, they are encouraged to do postgraduate work, whether Masters or PhD ”

Many do not encourage students into a Masters pathway. This is generally due to the lack of a relevant Masters program.

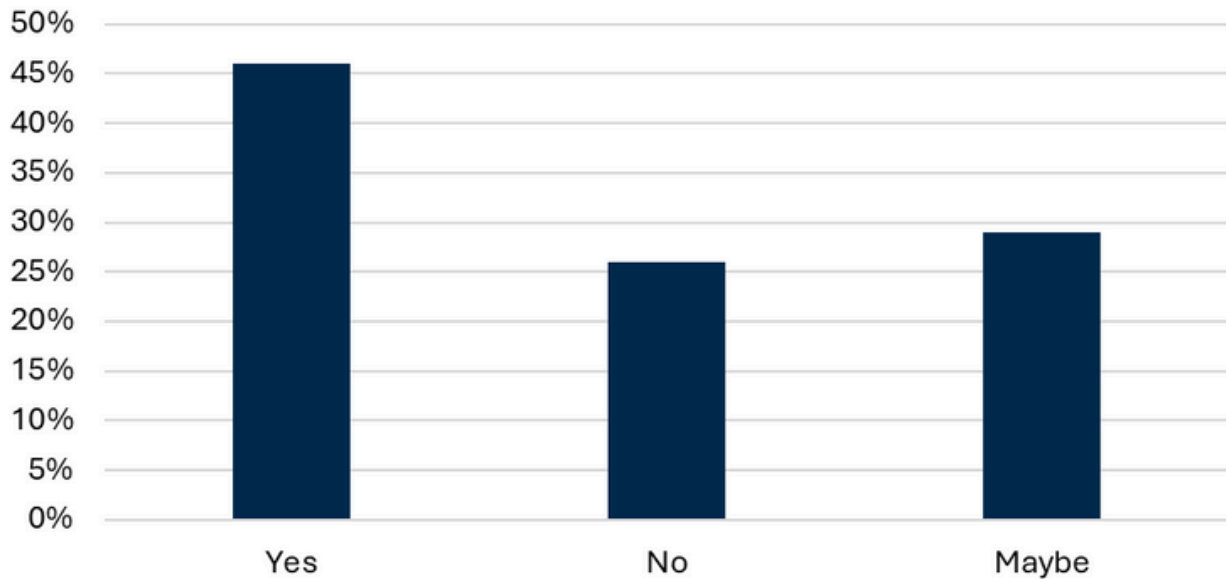
Would you consider encouraging students into a Masters if Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) were available?

Overall, the results on these two questions were inconclusive and did not point to a direction for the future of Honours. While some might encourage pathways into a Masters with a research component if CSPs were available, there were not strong indications that this might be a preferred pathway.

The majority were supportive of this proposal but several convenors raised concerns about losing the Honours pathway and did not see the Masters program as a suitable substitute for Honours

“ Perhaps, but in our discipline the Honours year of research training and deepening of skills and knowledge is really indispensable ”

Would you be interested in cross-institutional collaboration?



What might facilitate collaboration?

There was potential interest in this, but quite a lot of hesitancy regarding the obstacles (institutional recognition, cross-institutional cooperation, funding arrangements) that would have to be overcome to make this work.

Ways to facilitate collaboration:

- Aligning aims and expectations
- Comparable programs at other institutions/curricular alignment
- Outlining the benefits of collaboration
- More funding
- Overcoming staff and examiner shortages
- Online facilities

Where to from here?

Imagining the future

- Is our imaginary commensurate with students' expectations?
- Would people be interested in collaborative online classes across institutions?
- Would people be interested in pursuing Masters options instead of Honours?

Conference discussion

After the survey results were shared at the DASSH Conference in Adelaide, the group of around 80 attendees took part in a discussion around the results and shared their insights using Slido to create some word clouds. Below are some of the main discussion points.

Major differences between the Australian and Aotearoa Honours programs are related to funding and government allowances.

The 2016 ACOLA report, *Review of Australia's Research Training System* stated that Australia's unique Honours year as an extended Bachelor qualification remains the most accepted entry pathway into Higher Degree Research (HDR) training. But it may not be providing the best preparation for candidates to undertake research training. While students saw Honours as a pathway to higher degrees and employability, Honours is more likely to be pursued as intellectual interest and curiosity.

There is a distinct gap in understanding between educators and students on the skills that are acquired through Honours. While students cited problem solving and critical thinking as key outcomes of Honours, educators discussed that more could be done to articulate to students the specific skills and training provided in Honours.

This was reflected in the [DASSH submission](#) to Jobs and Skills Australia around the development of a National Skills Taxonomy (NST). A key recommendation was for the NST to help educators and students identify, translate and promote cognitive and higher order skills obtained in the arts, social sciences and humanities.

Challenges

Honours is highly valued by institutions but student demand is slowing and new ways of cooperating need to be found to sustain enrolments.

The survey indicates over 80 per cent of the surveyed Honours students are enrolled in an additional one year of education to complete Honours but the unique research-based structure of Honours in Australia and Aotearoa is not understood internationally. This can be a barrier to students pursuing higher level education and professional careers internationally.

It is unlikely that the sector will be able to develop a one-size-fits-all for the future of Honours and there will likely continue to be variation between institutions. This is reflected in the inconsistencies in Honours enrolment across disciplines displayed in the survey results.

It is becoming more common for Faculties to develop Faculty-wide research methods courses to cater for larger groups of students and disciplinary backgrounds. The differences in research courses for Honours needs to be understood to ensure sustainability of research practices.

A way forward

Innovative entry pathways, such as a for-purpose HDR training Masters degree would improve the overall outcomes of Australia's HDR training system but the development of such pathways is currently limited by regulatory and funding restrictions. Such pathways could also provide increased opportunity for industry placements.

Masters options could include allocating Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) to a Master program and potentially offering one cross-Faculty Advanced Research Masters with a strong thesis component. It is recognised that although CSPs can be allocated, students cannot access FEE-HELP for postgraduate programs which can determine the ability of students to enrol.

Regular get togethers, or collaborative online sessions, at different institutions could provide face-to-face opportunities for external students. This could also help to accommodate part-time study options, alternative pathway entry and mid-year entry, given around 40 per cent of the current Honours cohort are 35+ years and growth might be garnered here. Survey results indicated that part-time enrolments are significantly lower than full-time, and more could be done to increase the appeal of Honours to non-full-time students.

Members who had experienced cross-institutional collaborative classes spoke highly of the benefits and the value it could bring to Honours education. Cross-collaborations could be an option to keep students engaged to avoid closing down Honours programs. Survey results indicated high interest in the possibility of cross-collaboration.

Conclusion

Honours is highly valued by academics, but enrolments are declining, and it may no longer be fit for purpose as a training for HDR or in terms of setting up students for international opportunities. The Future of Honours project identifies the need to explore and understand the purpose of the Honours in creating new generations of researchers, furthering careers and social impact. This is centred around challenges and finding a way forward to sustain enrolments.

The results of the surveys provide insight into the perspectives of students and educators to understand the characteristics and underlying motivations driving Honours enrolment. There is inconsistency between reasons why students pursue Honours education and what they gain from it, and the educators perceptions of the skills and training provided.

The discussion points raised by DASSH members at the 2024 conference highlight various concerns and opportunities about the sustainability of Honours education in Australia. There is particular focus on cross-institutional collaboration, funding and skills attained through research. There is also a need to consider how Honours can be more appealing to students who are unable to study full-time or attend campus regularly.