

Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance Manual



Office of Pro Vice-Chancellor Teaching and Learning

Title:	Appendix C: Honours Criteria and Standards
Last Revised:	8 October 2001
Antecedents:	<p><i>Guidelines on Honours Criteria and Standards</i>, Academic Senate, April 1994</p> <p>“AVCC Fourth Year Honours Programs – Guidelines for Good Practice”, June 1995</p> <p><i>Section BVII Honours Reports Including University Medal Nominations</i>, 2000 Quality Assurance Manual, Academic Senate,</p> <p><i>Appendix B7.1 Honours Criteria and Standards</i>, 2000 Quality Assurance Manual Academic Senate, Feb 2000</p>
Date Approved:	Academic Senate, Feb 2000

Appendix C: Honours Criteria and Standards

Following a survey in late 1993 of honours practices across all departments offering honours programs, Academic Senate endorsed a number of recommendations concerning Honours Criteria and Standards. Faculties are expected to monitor honours programs consistent with these guidelines and with the AVCC Fourth Year Honours Programs - Guidelines for Good Practice below.

Proposals for new honours programs are checked by the T&LC with respect to their compliance with the guidelines, notably the requirement for the research component of Honours assessment normally being a minimum of 30%.

These honours criteria and standards were developed primarily in relation to honours degrees (an end-on program following completion of a bachelor degree). In late 1996 ASCQA considered the degree to which the criteria and standards apply to degrees with honours (honours integrated into four year or longer bachelor degrees) and concluded that the minimum 30% honours assessment was either adhered to or could be accommodated within the revised standard weight system.

In October 1998 the T&LC received a report containing information on the ratio of honours graduates compared to the total cohort and the number of Australian Postgraduate Awards (APA's) awarded compared to the total number of graduates. The Committee considered the appropriateness of the report, noting that the original rationale had been to investigate why some Schools/Faculties get more APA allocations than others. It noted the need for there to be a balance in the allocation of APA's between those areas with a proven 'track record' in research and those which have more recently been developing their research strength. The Committee agreed to refer this issue to the Research Committee asking them to take this aspect into account, given the reduction in the overall number of APA's being granted. The Committee also agreed that benchmarking of honours should be added to the areas identified for School-based benchmarking.

Guidelines on Honours Criteria and Standards

Guidelines on Honours criteria and standards were approved by the Academic Senate in April, 1994 and have subsequently been reviewed and updated. While they are intended to apply primarily to end-on honours programs, Academic Senate endorses their application, as appropriate, to integrated honours programs in courses of four years or more, including those awarded on the basis of performance. Faculties are expected to monitor honours programs consistent with these guidelines and with the AVCC Fourth Year Honours Programs - Guidelines for Good Practice, June 1995. Proposals for new honours programs should also adhere to these guidelines (particularly item 3).

1. The establishment of minimum entry requirements for Honours courses should not be imposed by Academic Senate, but remain the responsibility of Faculties and Schools. However all candidates for end-on honours courses shall have qualified for admission to a pass degree, as specified by the Faculty concerned, and be deemed by the Faculty as being eligible to enrol for the Honours degree. Candidates for admission to an integrated honours program shall satisfy the requirements listed in the relevant course specifications. Faculties may determine such eligibility in terms of a minimum grade point average and/or other criteria. Schools should provide information to applicants on the criteria used for decisions concerning admission.
2. All students qualified to embark upon an Honours program should be encouraged to proceed to Honours.
3. Recognition of the importance of the Honours year as preparation for a postgraduate research career should be reflected in the research component of Honours assessment normally being a minimum of 30%. Students should be given clear advice prior to commencement of Honours on the composition of the research component and its proportion of the total Honours load.

4. Prior to the commencement of Honours students should be provided with clear written advice on the criteria used for assessment and in particular assessment of the dissertation including definitions of performance at the various grades of honours.¹ Schools should strictly adhere to such criteria in the assessment of Honours and should provide all examiners, particularly external examiners, with a clear statement of the criteria and standards.
5. The Honours program should be recognised as the principal determinant of suitability for postgraduate research and the basis upon which research scholarship applicants may be ranked. The level of honours awarded must be based solely on the work specified and completed for the honours degree and not on other considerations.
6. There shall be a supervisor designated by the Head of School for each student who shall be responsible for academic guidance and monitoring of progress, particularly of projects or the dissertation, and assisting in the choice of a research project and in the planning of research. Guidelines should be provided to supervisors on good practice in supervision.
7. A verbal presentation of the research component of Honours should be required as part of the assessment.
8. Schools contemplating the development of Honours courses should seek guidance from cognate Schools in planning Honours procedures and practices.
9. Each Faculty should establish a Faculty Honours Coordination Panel (which could be the Faculty's Teaching & Learning Committee) to advise and coordinate Honours procedures and practices and monitor the effectiveness of supervision and assessment procedures within the Faculty. This Honours Coordination Panel should contribute to regular reviews of honours programs within the Faculty with attention in particular being paid to student feedback.

¹ It is recommended that Schools put in place a mechanism whereby students acknowledge, in writing, receipt of the information outlined in 3 and 4 and that they have sighted the conditions under which they will be working.

AVCC Fourth Year Honours Programs Guidelines for Good Practice

Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (ACN 008 502 930)

June 1995

Canberra

Honours degrees in Australian Universities are structured in a variety of ways. These guidelines are intended to apply to "add-on" fourth year programs which follow a three-year bachelor degree. Where applicable, institutions may also wish to apply them to other forms of honours programs.

The term "department" is used to refer to the basic disciplinary organisational unit. Some institutions may use different terminology and in any event may prefer to apply some of these processes at other organisational levels.

1. Purposes and Organisation

- 1.1 The primary goal of Honours Programs should be on research training. Within this broader context of introducing students to research, departments should formulate and explicitly state the objectives of their Honours Program. The content of the program, and the assessment processes, should clearly reflect the objectives.
- 1.2 Departments should identify the particular purposes and character which distinguish their Honours Program from their other undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs.
- 1.3 Where feasible, collaboration between departments in an institution and across institutions should be encouraged so that the range of specialist courses and the pool of students for them can be increased.

2. Responsibilities and expectations

- 2.1 Honours Programs should contain a mix of advanced theory, professional training (where appropriate), research training, and a research project leading to a thesis (in some fields, for example the performing arts, an alternative form of presentation may be appropriate). No overall guidelines are appropriate, but each discipline should establish appropriate upper and lower boundaries for the proportion of the total assessment allocated to the thesis component. The thesis components of most current programs fall in the range 30 - 70 per cent.
- 2.2 The academic staff involved in supervising honours candidates should be active researchers or at least have a sound background in research. As normal practice, Associate Supervisors should be nominated to provide back-up if a supervisor becomes unable to act, and also as a form of staff development for junior staff.
 - 2.2.1 Where appropriate, substantial involvement in supervision by qualified non-academics, for example from industry, should be encouraged. In some instances it may be appropriate to appoint these external contributors as Associate Supervisors.
- 2.3 Departments should ensure that the expectations and responsibilities of supervisors and students are clearly understood by both parties. Guidelines should be provided to supervisors on good practice in supervision.
- 2.4 Departments should provide students with written information (in the form of a Handbook or in other appropriate publications) on the aims, nature and benefits of the Honours Program, together with details of staff interests; the role of supervisors; expectations about supervisor - student contact; facilities available; course requirements and assessment

procedures; thesis requirements (including style guide and work limit); information on the criteria used for decisions concerning the assessment Honours Program; weightings of the various components; submission dates; and guidelines for such activities as laboratory, field or studio work.

- 2.5 Departments involved in joint cooperative honours programs should give particular attention to determining assessment standards and the possible difficulties for students with travel and timetables.
- 2.6 A systematic information and advice program should be provided to potential students early in their undergraduate program. As well as individual advice and encouragement, documents should be provided which set out requirements, expectations, the structure of the program and the facilities. In particular, admission criteria should be carefully spelt out.
- 2.7 Departments should provide a formal organisational and administrative structure for the Honours program (for example Honours Coordinators or Course Committees) for such matters as:
 - scrutinising thesis proposals;
 - making recommendations on course proposals;
 - monitoring the structure and coherence of the Honours course offerings;
 - monitoring the effectiveness of the supervision provided;
 - monitoring assessment procedures.
- 2.8 Programs should include components involving the development of both written and oral communication skills. Normally students should be required to provide a seminar on their thesis or to engage in an oral defence of their work.
- 2.9 Departments should work to ensure comparability of Honours award grading within the same discipline across institutions by exchange of information and staff, and where appropriate, involvement of professional associations. Institutions should also seek to achieve greater comparability across their departments and across the whole university system. There should be regular reviews of all Honours Programs to provide on-going monitoring of the conduct and standards of Honours Programs. The use of external assessors or moderators appointed for a period of say, 3 years could assist in achieving greater comparability.
- 2.10 Departments should regularly evaluate their Honours Program in terms of the suitability of its objectives, success in achieving its objectives, the comparability of its standards, and student equity.

3. Assessment

- 3.1 Departments should provide regular and systematic feedback to students on all elements of their performance in the honours year as it proceeds.
- 3.2 The supervisor's role as an examiner should be delineated, and policy on the number of examiners and the use of external examiners clearly specified.
- 3.3 Departments should develop explicit criteria for the assessment of theses, including definitions of performance at the various grades of honours. All examiners, particularly external examiners, should be provided with a clear statement of the criteria and standards.
- 3.4 The assessment process should include written reports on the thesis incorporating a short statement of the reasons for the grade or mark awarded to the thesis. Student should be apprised of the result for each component of the classification of Honours award.
- 3.5 Departments should maintain written records of the criteria used for grading Honours performance to facilitate comparability from year to year. Written records of the considerations entered into in reaching final grades for students should be maintained.

- 3.6 Departments should endeavour to finalise Honours grades for students as early as possible to facilitate consideration of applications for Australian Postgraduate Awards etc. Final grades should preferably be released by 30 November each year.