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Stimulating the Diffusion of Innovations in Honors Education: Three Factors

Inge Otto
Leiden University, i.otto@hobeon.nl

Chris de Kruif
Leiden University

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Inge Otto and Chris de Kruif
Leiden University

INTRODUCTION

So far, few articles about innovations in Dutch or American honors programs appear to link their findings to an existing body of research about innovations in higher education in general. Although scholars are starting to make this connection more and more (see Kallenberg; NRO, "Excellentie" and "EXChange"; NWO, "Excellentie" and "EXChange"; Jong), both parties could profit from greater contact. Scholars who study innovations in honors programs could benefit from a comparison of their findings to those in more mature fields, i.e., research about innovation in higher education. At the same time, a full model of innovation in higher education should take into account the findings about honors programs, which are natural innovation labs and thus relevant to research about higher education. Here we focus on factors that promote or block the diffusion of innovations from Dutch honors programs to other components of the Dutch higher education system.

PURPOSE

We examine three factors that emerged most frequently in a recent meeting of experts in Dutch honors programs on 'honours education as a laboratory for educational innovation.' This meeting was held in Leiden on 2 November 2016; jointly organized by Universiteit Leiden and Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, it attracted thirty-six stakeholders who worked in, or on, honors programs in the Netherlands as teachers, organizers, policy makers, or researchers. In discussions about factors that might promote or block the diffusion of innovations from Dutch honors programs to other places in the Dutch higher education system, these three factors were named most frequently:

- the need for a safe environment in the classroom,
- the need to establish communities of teachers, and
- the need for institutional support.

Various experts in the meeting believed that in order to be able to experiment, honors teachers need classrooms that provide safe environments in order to encourage experimentation and allow innovations to emerge. To stimulate the diffusion of resulting innovations, stakeholders believed that teacher communities and institutional support are crucial. While the meeting was held in the Netherlands and focused on Dutch honors programs, and while the setup and character of honors differ between the U.S. and Europe (see Wolfensberger, *Talent Development* and Wolfensberger, Eijl, et al., "Laboratories"), the issues raised at the meeting are relevant to honors education anywhere.

Our discussions of the research literature about each of the three factors look beyond the current literature about honors programs as innovation labs and offer clear pathways to ideas from other fields. We also hope to stimulate reflection on the topic among researchers, teachers, organizers, and managers working in the field of honors education by offering questions they can pursue.

MAIN CONCEPTS

The central concepts in our study are innovation and diffusion. We rely on Rogers's definition of these concepts. He defines innovation as

> an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption. It matters little, so far as human behavior is

> concerned, whether or not an idea is "objectively" new as measured by the lapse of time since its first use or discovery. The perceived newness of the idea for the individual determines his or her reaction to it. If an idea seems new to the individual, it is an innovation. (12)

In this sense, honors programs function as innovation labs for teachers' individual experiments with, for instance, pedagogical strategy, technology, and course content. Our study focuses on the spread of new ideas that teachers have developed in honors programs: on the diffusion of innovations. Rogers defines diffusion as

> the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. It is a special type of communication, in that the messages are concerned with new ideas. (5)

STRUCTURE

We first provide a description of the expert meeting that was held and then dive into the three factors that promote or block the diffusion of innovations. For each factor, we summarize and review the comments made by the stakeholders in the expert meeting and then evaluate them in light of various types of research literature, i.e., Dutch literature about Dutch honors programs as laboratories for educational innovation, publications in *Honors in Practice* (*HIP*) and the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (*JNCHC*), and relevant research literature collected from other journals, especially from the fields of higher education and organizational psychology. Finally, we provide a conclusion to our exploration.

The Expert Meeting

The Main Goal and Set-Up

The goal of the expert meeting was to gather the current ideas, knowledge, and experiences of stakeholders in Dutch honors education on one topic: honors programs as labs for educational innovation. A sub-goal was to decide collectively on potential future steps to foster the position of Dutch honors programs as innovation labs. Three thirty-minute brainstorm sessions were set up to focus on three key questions: (1) Are honors programs labs for educational innovation? Why (not)? (2) What are necessary factors for

honors programs to function as laboratories for educational innovation? (3) What actions can or should be taken in the (near) future?

The brainstorm sessions were organized in a pressure-cooker format. The participants were split into groups of six to eight people on the basis of (a) the position they held in honors programs and (b) the educational institution with which they were affiliated. The groups were as diverse as possible. The composition of the brainstorm groups changed with each new session. Moderators oversaw the discussion sessions while student secretaries took minutes of key issues in an online environment (i.e., Trello, https://trello.com) that was projected on a big screen visible to all present. After the three rounds, the organizers analyzed the key issues listed in Trello. The rough results served as input for a subsequent plenary session.

The Participants

Invitations to the expert meeting were sent to all members of the informal honors network of Dutch universities of applied sciences and research universities (*het informele hbo-wo honoursnetwerk*). Virtually all Dutch universities of applied sciences and research universities that offer an honors program have become members of this network. Excluding the organizers, thirty-six stakeholders joined the meeting. They worked in honors education as deans (2), program managers (or "directors") (5), coordinators (15), teacher-coordinators (2), teachers (3), researchers (6), policy makers (2), or policymaker-organizers (1). The experts were affiliated with any of the nine universities of applied sciences and eight research universities listed in Table 1. As shown, a number of participants were from Leiden University or from Utrecht University. The overrepresentation of these universities is a point to take into account when interpreting the findings.

Data Collection, Analysis of Discussions, and Results

Student secretaries created separate online lists of issues that were raised in the discussion sessions. To indicate how often a particular comment was made, we categorized and weighted the arguments based on the number of groups in which a particular type of issue emerged. While a full account of the results of the expert meeting may be found in Otto, Van Haaren, & De Kruif, here we deal only with the stakeholders' reflections on the second key question raised in the expert meeting: What are necessary factors for honors programs to function as laboratories for educational innovation? We discuss

only the three factors that recurred at the highest number of tables. An important caveat, however, is that the secretaries did not precisely record how many stakeholders at a discussion table (dis)agreed with any argument.

EVALUATING THE THREE FACTORS IN LIGHT OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The three factors mentioned most frequently in the expert meeting were the need for a safe environment in the classroom, the need to establish a teacher community, and the need for institutional support.

The Need For a Safe Environment In the Classroom

Various stakeholders in the expert meeting believed that a safe atmosphere in which honors teachers can experiment is an important factor if honors programs aim to function as labs for educational innovations, as this characteristic quotation indicates:

> If we intend to use honors programs as labs for educational innovations that may spread throughout the institution, honors teachers should be offered a safe atmosphere in which they can experiment, i.e., there should be little risk of losing face, and making mistakes should be allowed. (see Otto, Van Haaren & De Kruif)

Table 1. Expert Meeting Stakeholders

University of Applied Sciences	Number of Participants	Research University	Number of Participants
Avans Hogeschool	1	Universiteit Maastricht	1
Hanzehogeschool Groningen	1	TU Delft	3
Hogeschool Leiden	2	TU Eindhoven	1
Hogeschool Rotterdam	2	Universiteit Groningen	3
Hogeschool Utrecht	1	Universiteit Leiden	7
Hogeschool Windesheim	2	Universiteit Tilburg	1
HZ Hogeschool	1	Universiteit Twente	2
NHTV Breda	1	Universiteit Utrecht	5
Saxion Hogescholen	1		
Total	**12**	**Total**	**24**

Past publications about Dutch honors programs have often claimed that honors programs offer "a safe (learning) environment" that is important for educational experiments (Wolfensberger et al., "Honours Programmes, Sources" 15; Wolfensberger et al., "Universitaire" 102; Wolfensberger et al., "Honours Programmes as Laboratories" 136; Wolfensberger et al., "Laboratories" 164). In support of these arguments, these authors say that Dutch honors programs have at least four traits that make them safe areas for teachers who wish to experiment:

1. Honors students are usually selected, e.g., based on grades, motivation, etc., which means that a highly motivated and committed group of students is available.
2. In comparison to regular study programs, teachers typically get to work with smaller groups of students.
3. Since honors programs often constitute a set of extra activities that students do on top of their regular study programs, the consequences of a failed experiment appear relatively small.
4. Making mistakes simply is allowed in the programs.

What is not described in the aforementioned literature but was pointed out by the stakeholders is that if students are unaware of a teacher's experimental approach in honors, they may—through their expectations and through the behavior they display when those expectations are not met—form a hindrance to the teacher who tries to be innovative. Honors students who are used to excelling in their regular programs and who want to excel in their honors courses may feel that they really need the teacher to take the lead. The assumption that honors students are typically "willing to embrace the unpredictability of an experimental course (Nix, Etheridge, & Walsh 41) was a concern rather than a certainty among various stakeholders in the expert meeting.

Dutch publications on innovation in higher education recognize the need for safety for employees as a factor for change. Kallenberg builds on the literature of change management and describes Kotter's eight steps for change as relevant for successful innovation in higher education (139; see also Kotter). Step 4 in Kotter's model is "communication for buy-in," which argues that making an environment open to change can be created only when participants feel safe. Studies from organizational psychologists also suggest that higher levels of psychological safety may strengthen individuals' drive

to experiment. Amy Edmondson explains psychological safety as the degree to which an employee feels safe to engage in extra-role behaviors, in interpersonal risk-taking, at work (for two recent meta-analyses of this topic, see Edmondson & Lei and Frazier et al.). High levels of psychological safety foster proactive work behaviors, and experimentation in honors is a type of proactive work behavior. Bindl and Parker define proactive (work) behavior as

> self-directed and future-focused action in an organization, in which the individual aims to bring about change, including change to the situation (e.g., introducing new work methods) and/or change within oneself (e.g., learning new skills to cope with future demands). (569–70; see also DuBrin 2–3)

According to this line of thought, a stronger feeling of psychological safety could encourage honors teachers to experiment. Edmondson & Lei further propose that "managers must work to create a climate of psychological safety (. . .) for people to feel comfortable speaking up with ideas or questions—an essential aspect of organizational learning—without fear of ridicule or punishment" (39).

An honors teaching setting characterized by student ownership requires teachers to engage in extra-role behavior, a type of interpersonal risk-taking, in which they might fail and run the risk of losing face or harming their reputation among both students and peers. Consequently, an important question is to what extent Dutch honors programs constitute psychologically safe environments for honors teachers.

While scholars claim that making mistakes is allowed in honors, practice seems to prove otherwise. Various stakeholders expressed the need for more tolerance of failure. Also, while the consequences of a failed experiment should be rather small (Wolfensberger et al., "Honours Programmes" and "Laboratories"), the stakeholders point out that teachers may suffer negative consequences such as loss of face. The stakeholders are calling for "a psychologically safer group climate," such as what Edmondson describes as a group atmosphere based on high levels of "trust, respect for each other's competence, and caring about each other as people" (375).

The idea of a safe group climate also touches on the generally accepted observation in change management literature that clear communication about change is one of the success factors, which Kotter described as "communicate buy-in." Various stakeholders raised a similar point:

> If we intend to use honors programs as labs for educational innovations that may spread throughout the institution, teachers and organizers of honors programs should speak frankly to honors students about this. (qtd. in Otto, Van Haaren & De Kruif, forthc.)

Communication about the experiment—e.g. explaining the experiment in connection with the learning goals of the students involved—might reduce the chance that students resist experimentation.

In order to ensure that honors programs are optimal environments for educational experiments, we can learn from expertise in innovation in higher education, change management literature, and insights from organizational psychology.

Directions for Future Research

If we suppose that one of the goals of honors programs is to offer labs for educational innovation by constituting safe environments that welcome educational experiments, the following research activities seem worthwhile:

- Meta-analysis of the factors that potentially affect—positively and negatively—the degree of safety in honors programs, taking into account that we wish them to be innovation labs;
- Measuring the level to which we may consider Dutch honors programs or modules safe labs for experimenting at present;
- Measuring the effects of the factors found in experimental set-ups.

The Need To Establish a Teacher Community

Several stakeholders in the expert meeting made the following remark:

> A community for teachers who use honors education as labs for educational innovations **and** for other teachers could facilitate the spread of successful innovations throughout the institution. (see Otto, Van Haaren & De Kruif)

The participants in the expert meeting suggested that these supportive networks for teachers could easily arise as a consequence of, for instance, (a) the organization of expert meetings, (b) the creation of a central online discussion forum for honors teachers, or (c) job-shadowing opportunities or internships. In addition to these examples, one stakeholder proposed that

honors organizers and teachers could turn to external experts, e.g., documentary makers (see Irwin) or professional writers, for help with dissemination of innovative practices from honors programs.

A review of the online volumes of *Honors in Practice* (*HIP*) and the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (*JNCHC*) suggests that little has been published about networks of honors and non-honors teachers. Scholars have typically looked into honors communities that involve students, staff, and sometimes parents (Huggett; Koh et al.; Riek) as well as "student learning communities" that involve students solely (Swafford; Reichert; Pouchak et al.). The literature about Dutch honors programs likewise reports on communities in Dutch honors programs consisting of students, teachers, and professionals (Ginkel et al., "Building" and "Fostering"; Wolfensberger & Pilot, "Uitdagingen"). The honors communities referred to in *HIP*, *JNCHC* and the studies of Dutch honors programs are student-centered: their main purpose is to foster the talent development and learning of students. Any special attention paid to teachers in these articles focuses on how they can play a role in promoting community building among students (see ten Berge & van Eijl 74; Ginkel et al., "Building" 206). We found no research specifically on the role that communities of honors teachers can play in the diffusion of innovations from honors programs.

The idea that communities can aid in the diffusion of innovations is widely supported by research on higher education in general (see the meta-study of Smith, "Lessons," for an overview). Social networks play a crucial role in the diffusion of innovations. Rogers, in his book *Diffusion of Innovations*, for instance, repeatedly points out that "diffusion is a social process, with an innovation moving through interpersonal networks' (297). As defined by Rogers, "diffusion is the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. It is a special type of communication, in that the messages are concerned with new ideas" (5).

In this respect, insights into social network analysis might be relevant. Individuals are more likely to take risks if they know that peers are also taking the same risks (Rogers; Valente). Also, Kezar, based on the work of Coburn & Russell and of Cole & Weinbaum, points out that "existing relationships are more influential than relationships created as part of a change initiative. Therefore, the more that change agents can build upon existing relationships for a change process, the more likely they are to be successful. This is not to suggest that learning communities or other communities created for

innovation cannot work but that they have proven less successful than an existing community where trust and familiarity already exist (Moolenaar & Sleegers 2010)" (99–100). Furthermore, Kezar explains the roles of "central actors" and "opinion leaders" in social networks (101). Central actors have the most ties to other actors in an organization. Opinion leaders are people who individuals say would influence their choices and attitudes in the network (Valente). People often wait to adopt a change until an opinion leader has adopted it. Earlier, Pilot describes how, at one point in time, a group of "the most capable" teachers at Utrecht University was invited to teach in the newly founded Utrecht University College (12). He reports that these teachers, who he says "had real authority among their peers" (12), eventually brought back innovations from the University College to the wider university. The findings of both Kezar and Pilot imply that teaching communities should consist of change agents who have strong networks or relationships within faculties and throughout the institution in order to act as diffusors of innovation. Such networks are already emerging in the Netherlands. A first example is the Teaching Academies founded at Utrecht University and Leiden University. Another example is the teaching professionalization modules for honors teachers offered at the University of Utrecht and Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen (Wolfensberger & Pilot 128; ten Berge & van der Vaart; ten Berge & Scager 3).

Directions for Future Research

A key question that emerges from our study is whether the formal establishment of teacher communities is desirable as a means for the diffusion of innovations throughout the institution. With the help of research carried out at the national level, we could try to find the answer in the following ways:

- Meta-analysis of the factors that affect (positively or negatively) the diffusion of innovations via professional communities;
- Measuring to what extent current teacher networks diffuse innovation throughout the institution according to teachers;
- Identifying types of dissemination activities that could be organized in teacher communities in order to effectively foster diffusion from honors programs throughout the educational institution.

The Need For Institutional Support

Some stakeholders in the expert meeting believe that institutional support is an important factor if honors programs intend to function as incubators and sharing points for educational innovations:

> If we wish to use honors programs as labs for educational innovations that may spread throughout the institution, the institution should recognize and support teachers, coordinators and others involved in honors education, also through means. (see Otto, Van Haaren & De Kruif)

Virtually no studies about innovations in Dutch honors programs have addressed the role of institutional support in detail. Only Wolfensberger et al., in "Laboratories for Educational Innovation," make a general statement that taking innovation as an aim is one of "at least four characteristics of [Dutch] honors programs [that] are important to their spin-off effects" (161). The ExChange project (see "Excellentie" in either NRO or NWO 2017 for more information)—a project with a big team of researchers led by Wolfensberger from the Hanze University of Applied Sciences—may indirectly provide future insight on the topic by using so-called ExChange teams that include people working in higher education management positions. The ExChange teams, which apart from management include teachers and students, use a design-based approach to implement interventions to improve the transfer of a culture of excellence within higher education institutions (de Jong et al.). Since the first results of the ExChange project have not yet emerged and since this project does not specifically focus on the role of institutional support, studies about innovations in Dutch honors programs that deal with the role of institutional support appear to be unavailable at present.

When we broaden the scope of our search and include literature about honors programs elsewhere in the world, we meet with almost no results. An online search in *JNCHC* and *HIP* that we carried out in January 2017—searching for terms like *encourag*, recogni*,* and *support** in the titles, abstracts or subjects of articles—suggests to us that little has been published about the link between institutional encouragement, honors teachers' desire to experiment, and the likelihood that resulting innovations get used more widely. While the search in both journals did yield lists with articles—e.g., a search term like *encourag** arose in the abstracts of 24 *JNCHC* articles—when read in detail, nearly none of the articles actually dealt with our topic. The term *institutional support* was mentioned explicitly in several articles in *JNCHC* but

solely in general discussions about "the economy of honors," i.e., about financial support for honors programs (see Andrews; Railsback).

Two publications in *HIP*, however, did come close to our topic. Dean & Jendzurksi made a case for the celebration of quality teaching to promote academic excellence (183, 188), providing ideas based on their program at West Chester University (186). While the article does not focus on the potential of honors teachers as innovators, it does deal with institutional support for teachers. In 2007, Carnicom et al. focused on one way that honors can serve as a lab for educational innovation, encouraging faculty to experiment with integrating the latest technology into the classroom.

The ideas of Carnicom et al. seem in line with previous literature about innovations in higher education, demonstrating that the availability of resources such as money makes it more likely that innovation in teaching and learning takes place (Hannan & Silver). Smith, in her metastudy "Lessons Learnt," similarly concludes that "money to support the innovation helps sustain interest and enthusiasm" and may help it spread (174). The experts' point about "providing institutional support through means" appears in agreement with the literature we found. In the Netherlands, the importance of financial support is being recognized through various channels. At the university level for instance, fellows of the Leiden Teachers' Academy are rewarded EUR 25,000 for their innovative projects. At the national level, the Dutch subsidy program "Comenius" financially supports educational innovation through faculty members.

The stakeholders' call for a more affective, emotional type of support from their institutions also seems justifiable if we consider the work of earlier scholars in the field of innovations in higher education, who have suggested that encouragement, recognition, or interest from senior staff and higher administrators fosters innovation in teaching and learning (Hannan & Silver). This kind of support improves the chance both that staff will devote time to innovative educational practices and that innovations will spread successfully (Smith, "Cultivating" and "Lessons Learnt"). Even a small case study like that of Hockings, who explored the barriers that one university lecturer faced when he tried to adopt a student-focused teaching approach, points out that the support and commitment of senior managers is crucial in experimentation and dissemination of findings (323).

That senior support may be crucial in the diffusion phase of innovation is also reflected in a study by Davis et al., who report that "administrative support emerged as most important in the last stage of the innovation process"

(583), affecting the chance that the innovation would continue to be used successfully (571). Kezar remarks that change frequently entails taking risks, and "people are more likely to take risks when they trust the individuals who are asking them to engage in risk-taking behavior" (102). She also refers to a study by Moolenaar and Sleegers, who examined the social networks of 775 educators at about fifty schools. These scholars found "a strong relationship between trust and the development of an innovative climate that would be open to change" (Kezar 102).

Directions for Future Research

We currently know very little about the effects of institutional support on the diffusion of innovations from Dutch honors programs except that it is a topic worthy of further study. As a next step, we imagine researchers collaborating with honors teachers and administrators as well as with higher administrators to answer questions like the following:

- What type of institutional support is likely to encourage honors teachers to experiment?
- What type of institutional support is likely to inspire or encourage honors teachers to disseminate their innovations?
- What types of institutional support are most effective in particular stages of the innovation and diffusion process? (see Davis et al.; Rogers; Gannaway et al.).

CONCLUSION

We believe that the issues we have raised are relevant to any type of honors education, regardless of the fact that the expert meeting took place in the Netherlands and focused on Dutch honors programs or that the set-up and character of honors differ between the U.S. and Europe. By considering the three factors that emerged from the expert meeting in light of research about innovation in higher education, organizational psychology, and business management, we were able to contextualize these factors and evaluate their relevance. We hope that some readers may feel inspired to adopt any of the starting points for future research we offer, perhaps especially the ones that relate to feeling safe in being experimental. A comfortable, reflective network of peers and the emotional as well as the practical support of higher administrators are keys to creating a safe environment and an innovative culture.

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The authors may be contacted at

i.otto@hobeon.nl.