

# The Reflective Professional Honours Programme of the Dutch Saxion Universities

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## INTRODUCTION

The Reflective Professional Honours Programme of the Saxion Universities of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands centers on a profile of what graduates of the program should have accomplished in addition to their regular bachelor's degree program. The development team for our programme first investigated what the profile should be, interviewing roughly three hundred business representatives to discover what they considered an excellent honours student profile. All the interview information was transformed into a concept profile. An Honours Council evaluated the concept, and the project team adapted it. Then the steering committee evaluated and approved it after further adaption. Finally the president of the University Board approved the profile.

Each academy within the Saxion Universities can start a programme on a four-year experimental basis. The areas of experiment are entrance selection, programme contents, programme didactics, coaching characteristics, student profile, and honours community characteristics. The aim is to experiment and share the best practices. All in all, sixteen programmes have been started. The programmes run alongside the regular university programmes, and no study credits are given; students proceed after positive assessments. Some programmes are within an academy, and some are independent. Programmes are assessed in the third year of the four-year experiment. Some are validated and gain the title Reflective Professional Honours Programme. Others are characterised as exceptional.

The student profile has been the key element in the development, implementation, and success of the Reflective Professional Honours Programme, and its six characteristics are the foundation of this unique honours programme.

## **THE REFLECTIVE PROFESSIONAL: SAXION DEFINITIONS**

Successful graduates of an honours programme at the Saxion Universities of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, after completing their bachelor's degree, have distinguished themselves with six characteristics that provide a unique profile as they enter the labour market. The ingredients of this profile (source: <<http://www.saxion.nl/buitengewoon>>) involves ingredients that are never all present to the same extent but, in some combination, mark the graduates as reflective professionals.

### **1. Breadth and Depth of Knowledge**

On the one hand, reflective professionals are specialised and, on the other hand, have a broad outlook. They have a wide mental framework and the ability to creatively combine knowledge with complex systems and important issues of professional practice. They search for challenging issues in knowledge centres or reputable companies. They can make regional and international comparisons, knowing that almost all professions have an international component.

### **2. Metacognition**

Reflective professionals are able to understand the development of their profession within a historical and philosophical context. They possess metacognitive skills such as analysing, setting targets, planning, and evaluating—metaprocesses that stimulate the profession to develop further. They both develop and share knowledge within a high-quality network, learning quickly and inspiring fellow professionals to higher levels of development.

### **3. Professional and Social Awareness**

Reflective professionals are enterprising in pursuit of new solutions with social meaning. Exercising cross- and multi-disciplinary thinking, being able and willing to take responsibility, and being able to communicate convincingly enable them to devise new concepts for professionals, companies, and sectors. Their professional journey is more intriguing as a “dance of change” than as a destination (Senge), and in this context they are aware of their professional position within a team, organization, or society.

### **4. Methodological Attitude**

In addition to evidence-based thinking and substantiated assessments, reflective professionals continuously evaluate the strategies they use. Fed by a strong analytical-intellectual ability and interest in theoretical depth, they arrive at new professional and social accomplishments.

5. Professional Detachment

Reflective professionals have the ability to reflect on issues from an extraordinary perspective. Professional detachment is a pre-condition for placing issues in an alternative framework that incorporates paradigm shifts. Reflective professionals have the inclination and ability to consider issues based on systematised experience and theoretical models, to see the issues on a micro, meso and macro level, and to take a point of view in this context. They repeatedly create and articulate their own learning questions as well as those of the professional environment. They both seek and create challenges and new paradigms.

6. Differentiated Profile Development

Reflective professionals usually develop a specific profile within which they function in a high-quality way to distinguish themselves, whether in entrepreneurship, management, or research.

In short, reflective professionals are innovators in professional practice, perceive new trends in society or in the world, take up their positions in a professionally responsible and innovative way, create new knowledge in order to consciously improve the system (double-loop learning), and even change a sector or market (triple-loop learning). They create the dynamics of innovation and see learning as a social challenge for the future.

## **THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING AN HONOURS PROGRAMME FOR REFLECTIVE PROFESSIONALS**

Various phases defined the evolution of our programme to develop a cadre of reflective professionals in the Saxion Universities. The first phase was the exploration of ways the participating professional universities of applied sciences (*hogescholen*) in the Netherlands had formulated their programmes. The second phase was a survey within Saxion. During the third phase, a research group was set up to carry out specialised research in support of the profile; these surveys are currently in progress. In the fourth phase, international feedback has been requested. The various phases and findings are outlined below.

### **PHASE 1: NATIONAL SURVEY AND LITERATURE SEARCH**

Our programme team initially made contact with other universities of applied sciences that had initiated such a project either recently or some time ago. The team visited universities of applied sciences such as the Hanzehogeschool in Groningen, attended nationally or regionally organized

conferences, and participated in national research groups. The programme team also studied relevant websites and other publications.

During the Conference on Excellence, Research & Development in September 2010, our team was introduced to important resources. The article “Een goede hbo-er is geen wo-er: het profiel van de excellente professional” (A good higher education institution student is not a university student: the profile of the excellent professional), written by Freddy Veltman-van Vugt and Daphne Hijzen, Hogeschool Rotterdam, made it clear that a successful undergraduate professional student is not automatically comparable to a successful nonprofessional university student. This distinction was an eye-opener. Rotterdam takes the position that undergraduates in professional fields will be working in a context characterised by change, as a result of which they have to be innovative and multidisciplinary.

Another important article was “Wat heeft excellente beroepsbeoefenaars gemaakt tot wie ze zijn?” (What has made excellent professional into what they are?) by Dr Claudia Hoeksema-van Orden of the Hanzehogeschool Groningen, who asserts that personal characteristics to look for are passion, single-mindedness, motivation, perseverance and leadership. These insights supported the multidimensional concept of the original Saxion design, mixing intelligence, learning ability, reflection, curiosity, creativity and motivation.

Our literature search on reflective practices led us to authors such as D. Schon (*The Reflective Practitioner*, 1983) and H.J. Hartman (“Teaching Metacognitively,” in *Metacognition in Learning and Instruction*, 1990); these authors provided guidelines for reflection in direct, interactive, and practical situations. Research at Lewis-Clark State College’s Division of Education <<http://www.lsc.edu/>> provided a link with *The Reflective Professional* and a set of reflective standards for the teacher.

## **PHASE 2: MEETINGS AND INTERVIEWS WITH ACADEMICS AND PROFESSIONALS**

In order to form a consensus about excellence, we held talks with senior lecturers and educators as well as boards of directors and various academic representatives within Saxion. We interviewed and filmed representatives of the academies who visited national conferences, and we also interviewed students (see Appendices A and B.) The result was a vast database of word images, out of which certain key elements emerged that became the basis for our profile of reflective professionals as described in our six characteristics.

Further confirmation of these elements came from the literature. Argyris, for instance, prompted our identification of several scales or loops relating to

professional individuals, teams, organizations, systems, and sectors. A reflective professional learns, applies knowledge, and innovates with an ever-increasing scope.

### **PHASE 3: RESEARCH**

During the third phase, a research group was set up to carry out specialised research in support of the profile. These surveys are currently in progress.

### **PHASE 4: SURVEY REFLECTIVE PROFESSIONAL: FEEDBACK FROM NCHC EXPERTS**

During the 46th Annual Conference of the National Collegiate Honors Council in Phoenix, Arizona (October 2011), we consulted various experts in the Consultants Center to get feedback on our profile of the reflective professional. (See Acknowledgments a list of these consultants.) We discussed our six distinct characteristics of the reflective professional, and the consultants offered positive appraisals of each of them as well as some additional insights or suggestions. Below are some highlights of their commentary.

1. The six characteristics of the reflective professional add to the seventeen NCHC Basic Characteristics by focusing on interdisciplinarity and risk-taking.
2. The focus on breadth and depth addresses both liberal arts and professional students in a balanced way.
3. Curiosity should be fed and nourished rather than taught.
4. Professionals need a high level of competence within their field but also need to communicate their knowledge to the public and to understand people of different backgrounds.
5. In the United States, service learning is an important component of honours, and students are expected to want to carry out professional activities for the benefit of society. The progress made in this context in Europe is viewed with a certain amount of envy. Americans seem less fully developed as members of society compared with Europeans; they see themselves as individualists and often have a paradigm of us and them, especially in relation to Mexican immigrants.
6. Reflection is an important goal, and ideally students should learn not in a comfortable but in an uncomfortable manner. Peer evaluation is one model

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in the U.S. that encourages reflection and often discomfort. Reflection also includes looking ahead to formulate new long-term strategies or policies for a student's discipline.

7. Civic engagement encourages students to later view their jobs with a sense of responsibility to give something back to society.
8. Our differentiated profile is a highly effective strategy that not only explains what skills students will have at the end of the programme but also makes clear to an employer why an honours student is a better candidate than the average graduate. Employers are keen to know exactly what they can expect from a reflective professional and how he or she can help a company advance. It may be possible to communicate these accomplishments more clearly through a certificate or through some kind of check sheet indicating how well an individual student has attained each of the six characteristics.
9. A liberal arts programme that makes use of the world classics might be useful in enhancing all six characteristics of the profile, with the caveat that the classics no longer come solely from the West but also from the Middle East, India, the Far East, and Africa.

## OUR PERCEPTIONS ABOUT U.S. HONOURS PROGRAMMES

Based on our experience at the NCHC conference in Phoenix, we drew several conclusions about American honours programmes that distinguish them from our experience in the Netherlands:

- American programmes have great freedom as far as objectives are concerned, but, driven by accreditation requirements, people are looking for concrete criteria and requirements a student must meet. Our profile of the Saxion reflective professional is an example of a further step in the process of formulating concrete requirements.
- American programmes are often focused on self-cultivation based on the world classics whereas the Saxion profile offers room for excelling in both the liberal arts domains and the transdisciplinary sphere.
- Members of the American programmes are often young people from the well-to-do classes and are protected from the outside world, which may not be the best manner of development for future leadership. On the other hand, honours students are expected to take responsibility during their studies and in their professional lives for contributing to society.
- The American teacher is often a portal to other cultures, standards, and values. For example, an art history teacher had students experience the South

American Day of the Dead as well as Halloween. A teacher of Greek acquainted her students with the Greek philosophers as a stepping stone to world philosophers.

- The educational community in the United States has an unprecedented degree of strategic flexibility and volatility. Rapid changes of provosts, deans, and directors result in the sudden and rapid abolishment or formation of honours programmes, costing a lot of energy and causing instability and fear.
- Honours programmes in the U.S. maintain strong relationships with the parents of honours students, who are often funders of the programmes, but do not develop relationships with disciplinary or professional organizations that monitor the quality of academic content.
- American honours programmes are strongly focused on publicity about extraordinary performance; they adhere to a certain ethos without its being linked to a validated profile. Several speakers introduced themselves by making remarks that they had the best students in terms of, for instance, national test scores or national fellowships or intrinsic intelligence or motivation.
- The developers of U.S. honours programmes are very keen to learn. The participants in the NCHC conference feel a certain solidarity in the shared learning experience during the conference, but few participants appear to exchange contact information.
- City as Text™ is a conference feature that focuses on historical, transdisciplinary, and cultural awareness, or *Bildung*, through urban exploration and through reading a city as if it were a literary text. With maps of the city, students and faculty are sent out to experience cathedrals, cemeteries, museums, parks, and neighbourhoods. Participants might explore, for instance, the way that events such as Katrina had an impact on the development and layout of a city, or, by reading tombstones in the various rich and poor cemeteries, they might learn what kinds of diseases and other causes of death have affected different social classes of a population. Following their explorations, participants—both students and faculty together—present their findings to each other. One objective of this project is community formation.
- The keynote speeches during the conference did not focus on honours education but on topics such as pesticides, music, floods, death, poetry, and art. About 40% of the audience for these general-interest lectures were students accompanying their teachers at the conferences. These lectures were a chance for students and teachers to learn and interact together.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW OF EVA BOONK, SAXION STUDENT IN SOCIAL PEDAGOGIC CARE (SECOND YEAR), HONOURS PROGRAMME: LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCE

1. How did you find out about the HP for the RP and how did the selection take place?

Initially there were various advertising campaigns, and after that I attended several introductory lectures and I received a personal invitation letter from the manager of the programme. Via other students I already had some idea of what it was. Then I decided to participate in the programme.

2. What is characteristic for the formats in the HP for the RP?

One characteristic is that you are left free and at the same time are given a clear assignment. The attractive thing is that the assignment can be given shape and developed in a highly personal way. In addition, as a student you get the feeling that you are alongside the teacher instead of occupying a position under the teacher. Also the fact that besides guest teachers there are only a few teachers following you and specifically monitoring your development, makes that you do not feel that you have to start from the bottom again. You build something together. They know you and encourage me in my specific development.

3. What is characteristic for the content of the HP for the RP?

First you have a good look at who you are, how you stand in the world, and then you look at what else there is. My own degree programme also made me look at myself, but now I look at myself and everything I am equipped with through a kind of *Bildung* method. My basic discipline is social work and I have also become acquainted with various ways of critical thinking, a way of thinking intellectually, etc. It is focused on domains of meanings, facts, perception and such. Therefore it more or less exceeds bounds as far as disciplines are concerned.

4. What is characteristic for the teachers of the HP for the RP

My teachers have a broad outlook and a great deal of knowledge. It is a broader kind of programme. They have a certain form of enthusiasm, and there is some degree of equality. There is also room for better feedback, more and differently than in case of a regular programme. There is specific attention for one's own and new ideas, as well my contribution. The

intention in artistic and creative thinking was to challenge one another. My strong point was drama; acting. Language constituted a gap in my skills. Then I was given the opportunity to write a monologue. I was given a challenge of my own, from my strong points and in which context different personalities had to be portrayed; I learnt with steady progress.

5. What is characteristic for the culture or community of the HP for the RP?

It is important that you do not stay put in your comfort zone but that you set yourself a challenge and get ahead. You spend a lot of time on discussions with other students. They might be from a Social Work, Applied Psychology, Nursing, Textiles, Mechanical Engineering or ICT background. This way you learn a lot from other people. For example, someone gave a presentation on nuclear energy. I had my opinions about this, but now my outlook on this subject has been substantially broadened. You learn that by listening to other disciplines, your outlook on things can be broadened and change.

6. Which characteristics of the profile of the RP do you recognise and can you indicate how you receive coaching in this?

*Breadth and Depth of Knowledge*

- Specialist and/or broad knowledge with respect to subject matter from own and other disciplines.
- The teachers have a broad outlook and there are many guest teachers. It's about philosophy, different ways of thinking.
- There was a lot of reflection involved in my own programme and I did this because it was required. Now I do it in a meaningful way and take aspects from it for my own professional personality. Regular coaching within the Bachelor programme was interesting but the HP brought me further still. In the coaching process I have learnt a lot about the capacity I still have to further develop my professional personality.

*Metacognition*

- Initially you find yourself in relatively small groups and you are still very much focused on your own development. In the second part you work together more, give one another feedback, learn from each other, and learn in the form of a think tank. Then the assignments are primarily focused on working together. You examine other people's work more intensively and with greater motivation. Regular higher professional education, as it were, teaches you the basic steps and now you learn to concentrate on much more specific points in the products of fellow students.

*Professional and Social Awareness*

- I think that this very much contributes to me adopting a critical attitude and that I am able to conceive how something could be done differently in my profession. I have learnt to dare say how things can be done differently. I have learnt how to make process descriptions and to reflect on these and to direct myself. When you are involved in a description, you discover new possibilities and new insights. This enables you to direct other people to do new things which you can in turn use in your own work situation. For other people in my environment and for my employer it will be very useful, certainly in the continuously changing working environment of social work, to have employees who are flexible, who dare look at themselves and dare introduce new insights, and dare encourage others to develop new insights.

*Methodological Attitude*

- We have learnt to adopt a critical way of thinking, based on various methods; in this context we have learnt to go beyond merely slashing arguments. We learnt how to look further than your own abilities, the library, and Picarta. Ordinarily you are restricted to the prescribed literature because this is sufficient.

*Professional Detachment*

- There is always more involved than simply answering the question. It is about yourself, it requires a broader perspective. As a result you function differently in your environment.

*Differentiated Profile Development: creates new knowledge to consciously improve the system (double loop learning) or even change a sector or market (triple loop).*

- I have, as it were, hundreds of methods for tackling things. I have a broad outlook and more empathy to understand the motives of other people. I am able to encourage people I know a little better to make the next step, or to broaden their outlook.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW OF SJOERD WERKHOVEN, SAXION STUDENT IN TECHNICAL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (2ND YEAR), HONOURS PROGRAMME: TALENT FOR NATURAL LEADERSHIP

1. How did you find out about the Honours Programme for the Reflective Professional and how did the selection take place?

I went after it myself. When my studies turned out to be easy I had a talk with the study career counsellor and was presented with options such as the HP programme and then I tried to find out as much as possible about it.

First I had to write a letter in which I had to explain why I wanted to participate. Then I had to present my passion. I was invited twice for an interview about my motivation and my choice for the specific programme. The first interview didn't go too well but during the second interview I had a better understanding of what I wanted to do.

2. What is characteristic for the formats in the Honours Programme for the Reflective Professional?

The HP is about project management and personal development.

Innovating, interacting, if you don't contribute you will not get anything out of it. The point is what you personally can achieve. There is interaction with students, graduates, and people in the field. For certain assignments you work in groups. The groups are formed at random and all day you work on broadening and acquiring knowledge. The groups also vary all the time. The only binding factor is the project management but everyone has a completely different personality and professional background. I learned the cradle to cradle approach in a project on construction and felt this didn't suit me very much. I also learnt how to manage conflicts, what my attitude was and my and other people's mentality. I recognised my pitfalls and learnt how to actively deal with these. Through methodical analysis of your own personality you also recognise types in others and you learn to deal with these as well.

3. What is characteristic for the content of the Honours Programme for the Reflective Professional?
4. What is characteristic for the teachers of the Honours Programme for the Reflective Professional?

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There are teachers but they are practically equals to the group. There is much discussion. Within the “teachers” group there are experts who come up with an idea with which you could do something yourself. It is not really a teacher who teaches you something. During a workshop about the creation spiral you were taught which steps you could take to achieve what you want. You have the step-by-step plan in your head and you have to do something with it yourself. This was also a workshop and that means that you have to put it to work yourself. In addition, there are also theory lessons.

5. What is characteristic for the culture of community of the Honours Programme for the Reflective Professional?

Close and open. I always feel very much at ease. Everyone is very open, helpful, and eager to learn.

6. Which characteristics of the profile of the Reflective Professional do you recognise and can you indicate how you receive coaching in this?

### *Breadth and Depth of Knowledge*

- Specialist and/or broad knowledge with respect to subject matter from own and other disciplines: technical business administration and in this case Prince2.
- Ability to creatively use knowledge in complex systems and issues from the professional practice: we did a practice case at DHL, the transport sector. There was a logistics problem, within business to consumer, whereby often consumers were not at home and the routes were inefficient. We went there together, with students, teachers and graduates. What we did was hold interviews and brainstorm. We heard the stories from the various levels and functions within the company and from there we formulated a solution.
- International outlook: this could be for a placement or minor in an international company.

### *Metacognition*

- Development of networks and purposeful deployment of networks: we do this constantly. All fields are covered in the people who coach me; a young professional and a senior professional. I am surrounded by a network of experts who are all helpful to me and who are all project managers from various disciplines.
- Ability to work together and share knowledge in a multidisciplinary context.

- Ability to inspire colleagues to innovative developments for the profession.

*Professional and Social Awareness*

- Self-managing learning ability. If you lack motivation it will quickly become apparent that this is unsuitable for you. You want to examine yourself critically and learn from this.
- Effective and convincing communication: I have grown in this and the programme ensures that I am good at it. The project requires that I am able to convince people.
- Environmental awareness: a project took place within DHL in order to improve efficiency. Once a project has been completed, I am still willing to help fellow students. I am being trained to become a strong social personality and not a knowledge gatherer.

*Methodological Attitude*

- Academic attitude.
- Analytical ability and ability for theoretical depth. Prince2, presentation methods, feedback methods, critical attitude.
- Acquiring and sharing knowledge.

*Professional Detachment*

- Ability to reflect from an extraordinary perspective.
- Critical detachment with respect to professional issues.
- Development of extraordinary personal learning questions and of extraordinary learning questions of the professional development.
- You are expected to look at yourself and you become a strong and dynamic personality who opts for a specific direction within project management as a discipline of his/her own.

*Differentiated Profile Development: creates new knowledge to consciously improve the system (double loop learning) or even change a sector or market (triple loop).*

- Own development trajectory and profile.
- Continuous learning process, focused on personal, professional and social development.
- By means of the knowledge of project management I can make a highly valuable contribution towards problem solving by means of a project,

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which in principle can benefit any sector. Because you probably do a project every two years and at the end of a project concentrate on what you have learnt in this sector through this project, you always learn something about the sector which you can apply in the next projects. My discipline is so broad as to enable me to call myself transdisciplinary.