

My name is Marc de Graaf, I've studied the bachelor in economics and I was admitted into the first shift of the Honors Program. I've been asked to write a short story about the Honors Program, about my motivation to apply, what I think of the program etc. I'm sure there will be like 10 stories of other Honors students available who all will say that the Honors Program is really nice, the students are smart, the courses are interesting and so on. I'll do it in a slightly different way. I'll simply illustrate the current academic situation and add some remarks which might be useful for you to think about whether you want to apply for the Honors Program or not.

A smart student in Amsterdam is likely to spend around 20 hours a week on his education, what will be enough for obtaining high grades. This implies that top students will have a lot of spare time which can be used for whatever they like. You can find a job, become a research-assistant, join a student society, take some extra courses etc. in order to be simply doing something. But even if you do all these things, then still you might be left with the feeling: 'Is this all I'm learning in a fulltime study program?' or 'Will I become a great economist the way I'm studying now?'. This adds to the feeling that we're not learning too much here and by simply studying our nominal study programs we're not likely to become great economists in the future.

One of the craziest things of our current generation is that while everyone knows this, the vast majority is comfortable with it. This is illustrated by the huge load of students who minimize their efforts by passing exams with a 5.5 or by professors simply asking students what the researcher in question thinks, while they should be asking what students think themselves (compare for example professors presenting the 'facts' on powerpoint slides vs. professors not presenting any slides (if you've ever had one...)). The second argument is partially caused by the increased number of students. This lowers the average student's level, what makes it less interesting for professors to find out what students think. Therefore universities are moving away from their fundamental purpose (which is to be a society of thinkers, where thinkers are both professors and students).

Once you agree with this story, you might be willing to escape the normal (/nominal) way of studying. Fortunately that's possible! The universities came up with the Honors Program which aims at grouping up the top 5-10% of the students with the best professors they've got. This program offers a place in which the academic society is much closer to the way it was supposed to be. As long as the universities keep the admission requirement as strict as possible (in order to get only motivated students into the program), it will definitely be a good way for actually studying in a way which allows for students to think differently and to come up with ideas which you might not have thought of in the way you're thinking now (before you participated in the Honors Program).

An unattractive feature might be that the program is entirely in English (I've heard this from several students). However, I'm sure you will be used to it after the first course you'll take (please don't let this be even a minor reason for not applying, since it would be quite irrational after all). The other unattractive feature that students often come up with is that the classes are in the evening. But seriously, is a Monday morning class more attractive compared to an evening class? I've never had evening classes on Friday (in case you might be thinking about that).

The only argument for me for doubting about whether to apply or not was why these 30 ECTS would make a difference. After all, it's only 30 ECTS over 2 years. So it cannot be that extremely challenging (on average I took courses worth 24-30 ECTS each 8 weeks). After having completed the Honors Program, I still agree with this argument. It is not extremely challenging in the way that it might hurt

your nominal academic performance. However, I truly think it is still worth it (if you want you could take additional courses in the Honors Program as well). It is a misperception that the best education will use a lot of time. Actually I followed some courses in South-Korea from Harvard and Cambridge graduates/professors which only used the time during their classes to teach (no homework or readings at all). In these courses I've learned most of my entire academic life. The ideal of the Honors Program is to become like this and I'm sure it has the potential for it.

For everyone who's doubting whether to apply or not, I strongly recommend you to at least try to get in (the least you could do is apply and if you get in, just see how it goes☺). Not merely because of the benefits it brings such as a nice graduation certificate, or the RA-ships you'll be offered, or the students or the professors you'll get in contact with, but mainly because it will change your entire personal development which you go through during your academic life. Everyone gets this personal development during his academic life, but developing by studying among the bests simply adds a lot. I hope my story is useful for you to make up your mind. In case you have any questions, I'd be gladly willing to help. Simply send me an email at degraafmarc@hotmail.com.