



Research-based Honours Degrees: The Perspective of Bachelor of Commerce Students at the University of South Africa

Edmund Ferreira* & Sumei van Antwerpen**

Abstract

The study was conducted among Bachelor of Commerce Honours students at the University of South Africa, an open distance learning institution. The main problem pertains to the reasons students pursue this degree, the value and significance of the degree as well as the reasons for doing the honours degree instead of a postgraduate diploma in a similar field of study. The most important reasons found for doing the BCom Honours degree were that it would improve future job perspectives, that the field of study was interesting and that having the degree would make one eligible for a master's degree. It seems that the 'image' of obtaining an honours degree is an overriding factor in choosing the honours qualification above the postgraduate diploma. The BCom Honours degree should be marketed and presented simultaneously with postgraduate diplomas, so that prospective students can make more informed decisions to meet their specific needs. Policy makers should consider making the research modules optional for the honours degree. This initiative would give all students the opportunity to obtain an honours degree with the required modules that meet their career as well as personal needs.

Keywords: honours degree, postgraduate diploma, qualification, South Africa

Résumé

Cette étude a été conduite auprès des étudiants en année de Licence en Commerce de l'Université d'Afrique du Sud, un établissement d'enseignement à distance ouvert. L'étude se penche principalement sur les raisons qui poussent les

* Professor, Department of Business Management, Unisa, Pretoria, South Africa.
E-mail: eferreir@unisa.ac.za

** Lecturer, Department of Business Management, Unisa, Pretoria, South Africa.
E-mail: vanans@unisa.ac.za

étudiants à chercher ce diplôme, la valeur et l'importance du diplôme ainsi que les raisons de faire la spécialisation au lieu du diplôme de troisième cycle dans un domaine d'étude similaire. Les raisons les plus importantes évoquées pour faire la Licence en Commerce étaient qu'elle améliorerait les perspectives d'emplois futurs, que le domaine d'étude était intéressant et qu'obtenir ce diplôme rendrait son titulaire éligible pour le diplôme de maîtrise. Il semble que « l'image » de l'obtention du diplôme de spécialisation est un facteur déterminant dans le choix de l'option de spécialisation au-dessus du diplôme de troisième cycle. La Licence en Commerce devrait être commercialisée et présentée simultanément avec les diplômes du troisième cycle, afin que les futurs étudiants puissent prendre des décisions plus éclairées pour répondre à leurs besoins spécifiques. Les décideurs politiques devraient envisager l'élaboration de modules de recherche optionnels pour le diplôme de spécialisation. Cette initiative donnerait à tous les étudiants l'opportunité d'obtenir un diplôme de spécialisation avec les modules requis qui répondent à leur carrière et à leurs besoins personnels.

Mots clés: diplôme de spécialisation, diplôme de troisième cycle, qualification, Afrique du Sud

Introduction

Is it worth doing a bachelor honours degree when pursuing a career in industry or is it a waste of time and money? The answer might not be that simple. Prospective students need to consider the reasons for the pursuit of such a degree. Of course, it makes sense if a career path requires such a qualification and if a prospective student desires to do further research, but is it the best for industry and productivity if such a student is employed in a specific field of specialisation such as human resources, financing or marketing?

Honours programmes globally are mainly confined to British colonies that inherited them from the British higher education system. In South Africa, Australia and New Zealand the original model was adapted to meet the local, cultural, educational and employment needs. These programmes, mostly for students who plan to pursue research in their chosen fields, are presented in different variations. Some offer it as a year-long programme of research or advanced course work. In New Zealand, a hybrid model of honours exists, while some still use the English model of honours as an award of merit for an undergraduate programme. It is mostly seen as a pathway to postgraduate research (Manathunga, Kiley, Boud and Cantwell 2012:140–141).

The Department of Business Management at the University of South Africa (Unisa) offers students the opportunity to follow either an Honours Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) degree or a postgraduate diploma in a specific field of study once a relevant undergraduate degree has successfully been

completed (Unisa 2014b:228 & 233). Students who complete a postgraduate diploma cannot proceed to the master's degree (Master of Commerce in Business Management, for example), unless they complete a module in research methodology at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 8, while students who complete a BCom Honours degree may apply to register for a relevant master's degree (Unisa 2014a). The content of the two qualifications differs in that the degree has quite a large component (40 per cent) of compulsory research-related modules where the entire diploma focuses on modules of a specialist field. Students can choose either the degree or postgraduate diploma as a fourth year of study and this choice is related to the specific need of each student.

Due to the fact that there is limited career guidance available to Unisa distance learning students, these prospective students use their own discretion in choosing what to study. What they choose is not in question, but the reason for their choice needs to be determined. The research was prompted by all the enquiries directed at the coordinator of the BCom Honours degree at Unisa, relating to the need for and difficulty of the research modules of the degree. The question that arose from these discussions is why students, if they find the degree with the research modules too difficult, do not pursue the postgraduate diplomas instead. These discussions also exposed the perception that one qualification is 'better' than the other. This needs clarification. Students might be choosing and pursuing the degree for the wrong reasons and seem to be very frustrated in doing so.

Academics of open distance learning (ODL) institutions have no direct contact with students or industry. In order to serve their community in a proper way, it is necessary to do a needs analysis and make sure that the content of qualifications offered meets the needs of both students and industry. The results of this study could also assist academics when determining future course content and syllabi.

Research Problem and Objectives

The problem under investigation pertains to the research-based BCom Honours degree in Business Management at Unisa. Unisa offers a BCom Honours degree as well as a postgraduate diploma. The purpose of this research is to determine the reasons why students pursue the degree, as well as the value and significance of the degree, as perceived by the current BCom Honours students. This could possibly give prospective students and employers an indication of the relevance of its content so that the needs of both parties can be taken care of when making decisions about future studies. It could also guide advisory board members of these qualifications to ensure that these

qualifications meet the needs of students and, of course, industry. Hardly any previous research has been done on issues involving the honours degrees in South Africa. The secondary objectives of this article are to determine

- the reasons and motivation for doing the research-based BCom Honours degree in Business Management at Unisa;
- Whether significant differences exist between certain demographic variables (the different age groups, the source of financial support categories and gender) with regard to the reasons for pursuing the honours degree;
- the perceived value and applicability of this degree;
- what honours students plan to do once they have completed their honours degree;
- the reasons for doing the honours degree instead of a postgraduate diploma in a specialised field of study.

Literature Review

Unisa is an ODL university that offers students the opportunity to study in their own space and not on campus. Unisa defines ODL as a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. According to the Unisa ODL Policy (ODL Policy 2008:2) open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed. Students have the opportunity to learn at a distance through the use of technology such as the Internet and working students have the time to pursue their academic responsibilities off campus.

Weingarten (2013:1) describes ODL as follows:

Distance education has been around for a long time, its form has evolved in a number of ways. However, open learning is a more recent phenomena and its definition varies from country to country and is evolving in recent years. The combination between distance education (i.e. the ability to study from the distance) and open learning (i.e. the ability for anyone to access the educational offer) is often referred as ODL.

The South African Scenario

The Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) was published in 2007, with its main aim to determine the qualification types, characteristics

and purposes of all higher education qualifications in South Africa. The HEQF provides descriptors for all postgraduate qualifications offered at higher education institutions in South Africa. The HEQF was revised in January 2013 and is now referred to as the Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework (HEQSF) (HEQSF 2013). Unisa is in the process of developing a new programme qualification mix (PQM) in line with the 2015 Strategic Plan. The HEQSF and the Unisa2015 Strategic Plan, therefore, provide an opportunity to look afresh at a number of matters regarding postgraduate qualifications. These matters include the structure of qualifications, the delivery modes and, finally, assessment practices. The HEQSF (2013:14) provides for the following types of postgraduate qualifications: postgraduate diploma, bachelor honours degree, master's degree, professional master's degree, doctoral degree and professional doctorate.

Students may register for either a BCom Honours degree or a postgraduate diploma once the relevant undergraduate degree has been completed successfully. Certain prerequisites apply when registering for these qualifications. Either of them can be completed in a minimum of one year. A separate postgraduate degree is awarded on successful completion. Kilfoil (2008) outlines the specifications and characteristics of both the above mentioned avenues as follows:

- The bachelor honours degree is offered at NQF exit level 8, with a minimum total of 120 credits, all at level 8. The degree is a postgraduate specialisation qualification, characterised by the fact that it prepares students for research-based postgraduate study. This qualification typically follows a bachelor's degree and serves to consolidate and deepen the student's expertise in a particular discipline and to develop research capacity in the methodology and techniques of that discipline. This qualification demands a high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence. In some cases, a bachelor honours degree carries recognition by an appropriate professional or statutory body. Bachelor honours degree programmes must include conducting and reporting research under supervision, worth at least 30 credits, in a manner that is appropriate to the discipline or field of study.
- The postgraduate diploma is offered at NQF exit level 8 with a minimum total of 120 credits, all at level 8. The main difference from the honours degree is that the postgraduate diploma does not include research-related modules and focuses on modules related to a specific field of study, such as marketing and human resource management. The diploma serves to strengthen and deepen the student's knowledge in a particular discipline or profession. The primary purpose of the qualification is to enable

working professionals to undertake advanced reflection and development by means of a systematic survey of current thinking, practice and research methods in an area of specialisation. This qualification demands a high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence. A sustained research project is not required, but the qualification may include conducting and reporting research under supervision. The qualification may be used to accommodate students who are not able to or do not wish to complete the research report for the honours degree. The purpose of this diploma is to provide career-oriented education in Business Management at an advanced level.

The admission requirements for the BCom Honours degree at Unisa is an appropriate bachelor's degree in the relevant discipline or a discipline closely associated with it, with an average of 60 per cent or more in the third year as well as having passed Strategic Management III. The degree consists of four compulsory modules and two electives. The compulsory modules are Research Methodology, Research Proposal, Research Report and Strategic Management. The two electives can be chosen from one of four different groups of business area related modules. These groups are Business, Financial, Human Resources and Marketing Management. Once the BCom Honours degree is completed, students may apply to register for the relevant master's degree. In the case of the postgraduate diploma, students cannot proceed to the master's degree, unless they complete a module in research methodology at NQF level 8 for non-degree purposes (Unisa 2015).

The admission requirements for the postgraduate diplomas offered at Unisa are an appropriate (the focus on commerce and/or management) bachelor's degree or an appropriate advanced diploma with an average of 60 per cent or more in either qualification (Unisa 2015).

The research-based honours degree was offered for the first time at Unisa in 2012 (Unisa 2011:3). The main purpose of the qualification is to provide students with honours level knowledge, specific skills and applied competence in the specific fields of study to prepare them to be lifelong learners, employable workers and managers, entrepreneurs and contributors to society and the business community. The qualification will articulate with other tertiary institutions and with other qualifications. Once the qualification has been completed, students may proceed to postgraduate studies at master's level. This honours degree was developed to prepare students for future studies. The descriptions of the BCom Honours degree and the postgraduate diploma make it clear that the qualifications serve different purposes and address different needs. Prospective students will have to make a choice based on their individual situations and needs.

The International Scenario

In England, 'honours' is not a separate degree involving a fourth year of study. It is simply classified as honours if the three-year degree is completed at a sufficient level of academic achievement. In Australia, an honours degree is obtained after an additional fourth year of study. The only other countries that have similar honours qualifications are South Africa and New Zealand. In New Zealand, the implementation of the degree varies according to university. Some have the additional year of study and others incorporate the British model (i.e. with distinction) (Kiley, Boud, Cantwell, and Manathunga 2009:22).

According to Charles Sturt University (CSU 2013:1) in Australia an honours degree is a programme that is completed during an intense period of study, either full-time or over two years part-time. Some honours programmes are integrated into the undergraduate course work programme. Most honours programmes involve an additional year of study, during which students undertake the required course work and research components. The following advantages of studying this degree are also mentioned: gaining an advantage in the competitive job market, showing employers that you have higher level of critical writing and research skills, and enabling entry into research degrees undertaken at master's or doctoral levels.

The Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Australia describes an honours degree as an additional year of study (a fourth year) at undergraduate level and includes certain course work units and a research thesis or project. The honours year that the ECU offers normally consists of both research and course work units, one semester's coursework study, preparing a research proposal and methodology and presenting the research results in a thesis. The university describes their honours degree as a degree that will fast track entry into a PhD or Professional Doctorate without completing a master's degree with research. It will also put the learner in an advantageous position for obtaining a scholarship for further research studies, for it should consolidate writing, critical thinking, analytical, communication and research skills, hone project management and problem-solving abilities and make such a learner stand out from the crowd as a future leader in a given field. Finally, it will give the learner enhanced employment opportunities and provide such a one with an advantage in any research or professional career pursuit (ECU 2013).

BCom Honours Degrees Offered by Universities in South Africa

The BCom Honours in Business Management degrees offered by the universities in South Africa are unique in the world due to different programme structures and admission requirements. The University of Johannesburg (UJ)

and the University of Cape Town (UCT) do not offer honours degrees in Business Management. They only offer specialised BCom Honours degrees, such as (in the case of UJ) Human Resource Management, Industrial Psychology and Information Management. UCT provides specialised options (although vastly different) such as Actuarial Science, Economics Finance, Financial Analysis and Portfolio Management, and Information Systems. The University of Stellenbosch (US) offers specialised honours programmes, which include Strategy and Innovation, Marketing Management and Financial Management. The requirements to study BCom Honours programmes at US need to be noted. Students must have completed a BCom, BA or BAgric Admin degree and achieved an average final mark of at least 60 per cent in the modules from the respective focus areas offered by the Department of Business Management. North-West University offers BCom Honours programmes in Entrepreneurship and Business Management, and Tourism Management (UCT 2014; UJ 2014; NWU 2014; US 2013).

The University of Pretoria (UP), the University of the Free State (UFS) and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) offer a BCom Honours degree in Business Management. The prerequisites are mostly an appropriate bachelor's degree with an average of 60 per cent in the third year of study. The structure of the degrees differs from one university to the other (NMMU 2014; UP 2014; UFS 2014).

At UFS the degree is organised with a script module that is compulsory. Students also select three Business Management-related modules per semester. UP and NMMU provide fixed programme structures. At UP students must complete the Research Methodology (including research proposal) module and then do the Research Report module. The programme also includes the compulsory subjects of Strategic Management, International Business Management and Integrated Logistics Management. At NMMU the programme consists of five lectured modules as well as a treatise on an approved topic. The modules of the programme include the following: Advanced Strategic Management, Advanced Financial Management, Business Research, Investment Management and Advanced Strategic and International Marketing Management (NMMU 2014; UP 2014; UFS 2014).

Students who study at any of these South African universities will all complete a treatise/script/report when they do a BCom Honours degree. Most of the universities offer a BCom Honours in Business Management, with a specialising field of choice. Only UP and NMMU offer a BCom Honours degree in Business Management with a fixed structure with subjects (according to them) relating to the Business Management field.

There seem to be as many different qualifications and syllabi for honours degrees in South Africa and elsewhere as there are tertiary institutions. Prospective students in South Africa, who have the choice of where to study, will have to decide which qualification meets their specific need and pursue it at the institution that offers it. Those who do not have such a choice will have to choose a qualification offered at the institution in their locality. Students pursuing distance learning education through Unisa have to choose between the degree and the postgraduate diploma, depending of course on their specific need.

Methodology

An inductive research approach was followed in this study. Descriptive research was employed to describe the profile of the participants, the motivation for studying the degree, the future plans of the students and the impact the qualification has on their aspirations. The questionnaire was created with the aid of the Lime SurveyTM, an online survey design and management software package. A self-completed questionnaire was chosen as the most suitable option for this study, because respondents were geographically distant. A study on the role of honours degrees in Australia was conducted by Kiley *et al.* (2009) and permission was obtained to adapt and add questions to the questionnaire they used, to meet the objectives of this study. The questionnaire developed by Kiley was used because it had been tested and could be adapted for the South African context to meet the objectives of this study. The questionnaires consisted of structured and open-ended questions.

The population consisted of all the BCom Honours students (n=787) registered at Unisa for the Research Proposal module (HPBUS81) for the second semester in 2013 (n=370) and for the first semester in 2014 (n=417). An email message was sent to all 787 students, requesting them to complete the questionnaire by selecting the URL link that was supplied. A letter of consent that was approved by the Unisa Senate Research and Innovation and Higher Degrees Committee was also attached. A total of 166 students (21.1 per cent) of the total population replied, 72 (9.1 per cent) from the second semester 2013 and 77 (9.8 per cent) from the first semester 2014. Another 6 (0.8 per cent), who were also part of the study population above, indicated that they were registered for the second semester in 2014. The remaining 11 (1.4 per cent) did not indicate their registration date. The data was captured on the Lime Survey database and transferred to a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Descriptive, principal component and inferential statistical analysis was conducted to answer the research objectives. Results were summarised to

present thoughts and reasoning. SPSS 22.0 for Windows was used to do all the calculations. Parametric (where the group sample sizes were large enough ($n \geq 30$)) and non-parametric tests were used to determine statistical significant differences between the different age groups, the source of financial support categories and gender with regard to the reasons for pursuing the honours degree. The non-parametric Kruskal one-way analysis of variance by ranks (to test the null hypothesis of the equality of medians across 'three or more groups') and the parametric Student t-tests (to test the null hypothesis of equal means for two independent groups) were used. The decision on the type of test used was based on considering the sample size of the groups tested as well as the data type.

The limitations of this study are that it might be biased due to the sample, which is not necessarily representative of honours students at Unisa, the target population, and that the sample was taken only from students in an ODL university, which cannot make it representative of honours students in general. Another limitation is that very few countries offer honours degrees as a fourth year of study and this could be one of the reasons for the absence of journal articles on this topic. Therefore, many Internet sources instead of journal articles were used.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Unisa Senate Research and Innovation and Higher Degrees Committee. The prescribed application documents were reviewed in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and permission was granted on 13 February 2014 (Ref #: 2013_CEMS_034).

Content validity of the assessment was established by relying on the subject experts, who in this case were the researchers and coordinator of the BCom Honours degree at Unisa as well as the researchers who had done a similar study in Australia. Kiley *et al.* (2009) did research on honours studies in Australia with several publications deriving from it. The findings were implemented at institutions that formed part of these studies.

Results

Profile of Respondents

Of the 166 respondents who participated in the study, 56 per cent were women and 36.1 per cent were men. The percentages do not add up to 100 per cent due to missing values in the data. About one third (30.1 per cent) of the respondents were in the twenty-five to twenty-nine age bracket. The remainder were spread with 11.4 per cent between twenty and twenty-four

years old, 19.3 per cent between thirty and thirty-four years old, 14.5 per cent between thirty-five and thirty-nine years old and 17.5 per cent over the age of forty. More than two thirds (66.9 per cent) of the respondents were employed on a full-time basis and probably support themselves financially. Only 11.4 per cent were supported by their parents/family and 1.3 per cent had scholarships or grants. Of all these BCom Honours respondents registered with Unisa, nearly two-thirds (63.3 per cent) of them also completed their undergraduate bachelor degrees with Unisa. Furthermore, nearly two thirds (63.3 per cent) of the respondents completed a BCom degree as their undergraduate qualification. Other undergraduate qualifications that the respondents had included were BTech (Baccalaureus Technologiae), BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration), BA (Bachelor of Arts) and BSc (Bachelor of Science) degrees. A few respondents (9.2 per cent) had completed a National Diploma.

Reasons for choosing the BCom Honours degree

The respondents were asked about their reasons for pursuing studies at honours level. They were given a few options and were asked to indicate the importance of each, ranging on a 5-point scale from 'not at all' to 'extremely' important. The most important reason noted was 'Graduating with honours will improve my future job perspectives' where 72.9 per cent of the respondents indicated this option as a 'very' and 'extremely' important reason. (All percentages in this paragraph are the total of respondents choosing the 'very important' and 'extremely important' options.) The second and third most important reasons were that the field of study interested them (68 per cent) and that they would be eligible for a master's degree (57.2 per cent). The options of 'Graduating with honours is a requirement of the profession that I am pursuing' (34.4 per cent) and 'To have the opportunity to do a substantial independent piece of research' (33.7 per cent) were seen as less important reasons and 'My friends and family have influenced me to pursue honours' (17.5 per cent) was indicated as the least important reason for studying towards an honours degree.

To determine whether these reasons could be grouped as a smaller number of factors a principal component analysis, with varimax rotation, was conducted. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (0.635) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, which was significant ($p=0.000$), both indicate that a factor analysis is appropriate.

Three factors were identified, based on the eigen value criterion, which explain 58.2 per cent of the variance. The final factor loadings are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Factor loading dealing with the reasons for pursuing an honours degree

Rotated Component Matrix ^a	Component		
	1	2	3
VAR12: Graduating with honours will improve my future job perspectives.	.861		
VAR13: Honours is a way of having my achievement of high grades formally recognised.	.612		
VAR9: Graduating with honours is a requirement of the profession that I am pursuing.	.596		
VAR10: To have the opportunity to do a substantial independent piece of research.		.734	
VAR8: To be eligible for a master's degree.		.729	
VAR7: To study further in a field that really interests me.		.705	
VAR14: Honours is just marking time while I decide my future.			.862
VAR11: My friends and family have influenced me to pursue honours.			.552

Using Cronbach alpha, the internal consistency (reliability) for the three factors was found to be 0.504, 0.572 and 0.337, respectively. The loadings of factors 1 and 2, both above 0.5, but below the generally acceptable threshold of 0.7, were deemed acceptable due to the exploratory nature of the study. The low value of 0.337 for factor 3 is of concern and future research is necessary to investigate the validity and reliability of this factor.

Factor-based scores were subsequently calculated as the mean score of the variables included in each factor for each respondent based on the variables. The three factors will be labelled career requirements (factor 1), internal motivation (factor 2) and external motivation (factor 3), respectively.

To determine whether there are statistical significant differences between the different age groups (18–19, 20–24, 25–29, 30–34, 35–39 and 40≤) with regard to their reasons, defined as career requirements, internal motivation and external motivation for pursuing an honours degree, the Kruskal Wallis test was used. Table 2 shows the Kruskal Wallis test results.

Table 2: Kruskal Wallis test results

	Career requirements	Internal motivation	External motivation
Chi-Square	20.299	13.755	9.275
Df	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.008	.055

The test results indicated that a statistical significance exists between the age groups regarding internal motivation ($p=.008$, 1 per cent level of significance), external motivation ($p=.055$, 10 per cent level of significance) and career requirements ($p=.000$, 1 per cent level of significance). The mean ranks indicate that the youngest group (aged 20–24) tends to regard internal motivation to study at honours level (mean rank = 45.97) as less important than the group aged from 35 to 39, which tends to regard it as very to extremely important (mean rank = 88.86). However, the mean ranks indicate that the youngest group (aged 20–24) tends to regard external motivation to study at honours level (mean rank = 82.63) slightly more important than the group aged from 35 to 39 (mean rank = 78.07). This might be to impress parents and peers and realising that they need it for their future career options. Regarding career requirements, the two younger groups, collectively aged 20 to 29 (mean ranks = 80.66 and 83.34, respectively) tend to regard this factor as much more important than the older group of 40+ (mean rank = 41.35). This seems obvious, as the older ones are reaching the end of their careers.

Regarding the source of financial support, the mean ranks indicate that the respondents who are employed on a full-time basis and part-time/casual basis tend to regard internal motivation to study at honours level (mean rank = 69.32 and 72.58, respectively) as more important than the respondents who are sponsored by their parents or families (mean rank 47.68). Regarding external motivation there is hardly any difference (mean ranks = 66.28, 65.8 and 68.55, respectively). When looking at career requirements, the full-time employees tend to regard this factor as less important (mean rank 64.40) than the other two groups (mean ranks of 72.46 and 73.89, respectively). Table 3 shows these results.

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis test results

Ranks			
	v3adj	N	Mean Rank
Internal motivation	1.00	101	69.32
	2.00	12	72.58
	4.00	19	47.68
	Total	132	
External motivation	1.00	101	66.28
	2.00	12	65.08
	4.00	19	68.55
	Total	132	
Career requirements	1.00	101	64.40
	2.00	12	72.46
	4.00	19	73.89
	Total	132	

The t-test was used to determine whether there were any statistical significant differences between women and men regarding the reasons for pursuing an honours degree. The Levene’s test for equality of variances indicated that equal variances can be assumed for the three factors career requirements ($p = 0.247$), internal motivation ($p = 0.629$) and external motivation ($p = 0.730$). Table 4 shows the t-test results.

Table 4: T-test results

Group Statistics							
	VAR2	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T-test for equality of means	Sig. (2-tailed)
Internal motivation	1	86	3.6550	.79615	.08585	-.030	.976
	2	51	3.8758	.74822	.10477		
External motivation	1	86	1.9942	.94400	.10179	-1.604	.111
	2	51	2.0784	.81469	.11408		
Career requirements	1	86	3.7016	.84641	.09127	-.531	.597
	2	51	3.7059	.73529	.10296		

The tests revealed that at the 5 per cent level of significance, there were no statistical significant differences between the views and opinions of women and men regarding the reasons for pursuing an honours degree.

The respondents were also asked for the reasons why they chose to pursue the honours degree and not the postgraduate diploma. Although less than half of the respondents (44 per cent) indicated that they actually had an option to choose between the two qualifications, nearly two-thirds of those who had said that they chose to do the honours degree because it ‘is more valuable’, ‘it seems more credible’, ‘carries more weight’, ‘it is highly regarded by society’, ‘is more prestigious’ and is ‘more recognised’. Most of the remaining one-third indicated that they chose to do the BCom Honours degree, because they wanted to continue with further studies.

The Value and Applicability of the BCom Honours Degree

The value of the BCom Honours degree was determined by looking at certain aspects related to the degree. The aspects (ranging on a 5-point scale from not at all to extremely important) the respondents valued mostly were ‘Learning new methods for the investigation of problems in my discipline’ (61.4 per cent), ‘Learning to formulate research problems’ (56 per cent) and ‘Having more independence to develop my learning capabilities

than I have had in my previous years of study' (55.4 per cent), where the percentages indicate the total of respondents choosing the 'very important' and 'extremely important' options. The aspects valued less were 'Working under the supervision of a member of staff' (28.4 per cent) and 'Being part of a selective group of students in my Department/School' (22.2 per cent).

What Students Plan to do After Completing the Honours Degree

Students do honours degrees for different reasons, but mostly to accommodate and enhance their future career options. When asked about their immediate future, 27.7 per cent indicated that once they finish their honours degree, they plan to undertake a master's degree, 10.2 per cent indicated that they would undertake another postgraduate degree and 4.8 per cent another bachelor's degree. More than half of the respondents (52.4 per cent), who do not plan to do their master's degree immediately after finishing their honours degree, indicated that they might attempt it at a later stage. Looking at the present number of master's students at Unisa, the 27.7 per cent who plan to do a master's degree seems realistic, as the current number of master's students (Unisa enrolments for 2014) is 191 compared to the number of honours students of 827. Some of the respondents (20.5 per cent) indicated that they plan to enter employment in a profession specifically related to their honours degree, while 13.3 per cent plan to continue with professional development studies available through professional associations. Only 4.2 per cent enter employment not necessarily related to their honours degree.

When looking at the different age groups and their future plans, the majority who plan to undertake a master's degree immediately after their honours studies are in the age group from twenty-five to thirty-nine. Of those who plan to enter employment in a profession specifically related to their honours studies, the majority are in the age group of twenty-five to twenty-nine. When looking at gender, 62.2 per cent of those who plan to undertake a master's degree immediately after their honours studies, are women. Similar percentages (about two-thirds) of female respondents also plan to undertake another postgraduate degree and continue with professional development studies. The vast majority of those students who plan to do any further studies are those who are employed full time.

According to the respondents, the skills and knowledge obtained by doing the BCom Honours degree are very applicable (in order of importance starting with the most important) to the following: higher degree studies, writing skills and the employment context.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Pursuing an honours degree is never a waste of time, whatever the reason(s) for doing it might be. However, it needs to be functional and relevant to industry and the individual. The findings of this study suggest that the BCom Honours degree is pursued mainly because it improves future job prospects, because of personal interests and, thereafter, to afford students the possibility of continuing with a master's degree. However, the applicability to the employment context is seen as less important. This does not correlate with their opinion that it will improve future job prospects and enhance their possibility of employment. The reason for them not valuing the honours degree as a requirement for their professional development, might be because only 40 per cent of the content of the BCom Honours degree focuses on professional knowledge and skills in a specialised field such as human resources, finances and marketing. The other 60 per cent of the content covers research modules and strategic management, which are not necessarily related to their professions.

Due to the fact that the honours degree focuses on research and opens the way for future studies, it is not surprising that the respondents chose this as another important reason for doing the BCom Honours degree. The research component of the BCom Honours degree seems to meet the needs of the respondents when considering lifelong learning, in general, and formulation and solving of problems and independent learning, specifically. Although the honours degree caters for both industry and further studies, it could be experienced as a limitation, depending on the specific need of the student or of the employer. For students who desire to further their studies, it seems to be good, but for employers who need employees who specialise in specific fields, it might be seen as a 'waste of time' doing the research modules. The specialist job-related content of the honours degree covers only 40 per cent of the total content of the degree.

Not surprisingly, significant differences do exist among age groups of students regarding the reasons for pursuing an honours degree. Students of different ages have different objectives and reasons for studying. Younger students tend to regard internal motivation to study at honours level as less important than the older students, who tend to regard it as very important to extremely important. The older group is probably at a stage in their lives where they have become more responsible and for them studying towards an honours degree is crucial for their career advancement. However, the younger group tends to regard external motivation slightly more important than the older group. This might be to impress parents and peers, and the realisation that they need it for their future career options. Regarding career requirements, the two younger groups tend to regard this factor as much

more important than the older group. This seems obvious as the older groups are reaching the end of their careers. Students who are employed on a full-time and part-time/casual basis tend to regard internal motivation to study at honours level as more important than students who are sponsored by their parents or families. Regarding external motivation, there is hardly any difference between the two groups. When looking at career requirements, the full-time employees tend to regard this factor as less important. There were no significant differences between the views and opinions of female and male respondents regarding the reasons for pursuing an honours degree.

The fact that more than half of the respondents indicated that they did not have the option to choose between doing the BCom Honours degree or the postgraduate diploma was quite surprising. Did they not know about the diploma or were they forced to do the honours degree? Did they not know that these two qualifications are similar in value and on the same NQF level? Unfortunately, the real answer to these questions was not determined as it was erroneously believed by the researchers that these alternatives are common knowledge among students and options that should be considered. Although some indicated that further studies motivated their choice, nearly two-thirds of those respondents said that they chose to do the honours degree because of its value, credibility, weight, high regard, prestige and recognition. It seems that the 'image' of obtaining an honours degree is an overriding factor in choosing the honours qualification above the postgraduate diploma. The honours degree was found to be very applicable when students considered further studies, improving their writing skills and their employment opportunities and professional needs.

Just more than a quarter of the students, mostly the older, working and female respondents indicated that after completing their honours degrees, they plan to continue with a master's degree, while one tenth of the respondents want to do another postgraduate degree. Just half of those who do not plan to continue with their studies would consider doing a master's degree at a later stage. The younger students tend to seek employment as a priority.

It is recommended that the BCom Honours degree should be marketed and presented together with the postgraduate diplomas so that prospective students can make more informed decisions to meet their specific needs. These decisions would be related to the requirements of their career paths and/or the need to further their studies. These two qualifications target potential students with diverse needs and students do not seem to be informed about the different possibilities. Together with this recommendation, it is also necessary to attempt to change the perception that seems to exist that the postgraduate diploma is an inferior qualification compared to the

honours degree. This perception is possibly also present in the working environment, thus the market value and usefulness of the diploma needs to be highlighted.

Policy makers should consider making the research modules optional in the honours degree. This would allow students to obtain a degree, rather than a diploma, and still meet the specific need of the student or employer. Students, who wish to continue with higher degree studies later in their careers, could then just do the research modules for non-degree purposes as a prerequisite. What needs to be determined is whether Unisa and other universities are meeting the needs of industry or whether research is more important in offering the BCom Honours degree.

On the one hand students want to be able to say that they obtained a degree and not a diploma, because of the perception that a degree is better and carries more weight than a diploma. On the other hand, students might choose to do the diploma that focuses entirely on a specialist field (with no research modules) which could be of more value to them in their specific working environment. Another complicating issue is the fact that the honours degree is also the shortest route to a master's degree. These issues may not only produce students who are doing a research-based degree for the wrong reasons, but may also produce employees with honours degrees covering less than half of their job-related content.

Students must be informed and assisted to make the best decisions when pursuing postgraduate studies. Decisions of which qualification to study should not be influenced by the name and perceived status of the qualification, but should be made with the specific need of the individual.

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