The Honours Degree
Honours degrees vary enormously in their aims but in general are designed to foster research training and develop research attributes that have wider application. Their aims and objectives must be clearly stated and their content and assessment must clearly reflect those objectives. In all, the purposes and character of an Honours degree should be clearly differentiated from other undergraduate and coursework programs.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), used to establish the quality of Australian qualifications, sets a Bachelor Honours degree at AQF level 8. This means graduates will have:

- “advanced knowledge and skills for professional or highly skilled work
- advanced theoretical and technical knowledge in one or more disciplines/areas of practice”

and will be able to:

- “analyse critically, evaluate and transform information to complete a range of activities
- analyse, generate and transmit solutions to complex problems
- transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to others”

they will also be able to:

- “apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, well-developed judgement, knowledge adaptability and responsibility as a practitioner or learner” (p50 AQF)

As such, in some disciplines, the focus will be more on achievement of work-ready skills that incorporate the ability for students to plan research activities relevant to the profession, manage their time independently and work collaboratively.

Policy and Other Supports
The Flinders University Honours policy includes information on the responsibilities of supervisors and students. Being aware of these responsibilities will help address expectations and this can significantly
reduce the stress on both students and new supervisors.

The Student Learning Centre offers programs to Honours students in their Lunchtime Seminars. This can include seminars on the research process, developing a proposal, constructing an argument and thesis writing across different faculties. However, you, as a supervisor, may also be called upon to provide guidance in different areas. This document outlines some of those areas as well as some tips for managing them.

Most faculties have a Research Manager and/or Post-graduate Coordinator who may be able to offer support. As Honours is not strictly considered post-graduate, in some faculties, Honours students will be supported in other ways (e.g. an Honours coordinator). Find out who this is and what support/training they are able to offer you in your role supervising Honours students.

Accepting an Honours Student
It is gratifying when students wish to work with you as their Honours Supervisor. However there are some issues for you to consider before accepting. These may include:

- Their academic record
  - Does it indicate they can cope with the work and thinking required of an Honours degree?
- Areas of interest vs yours vs others in your area
  - Do these align?
  - Is there someone better suited to supervise this student? Students can play supervisors off against each other.
- Type of project they are interested in doing?
  - Can you offer what they are interested in? Is what you have on offer of interest to them? If not, it will be a particularly difficult and challenging year for everyone involved.
- Your availability
  - Are you planning to be away during the year?
  - How contactable are you expected to be (e.g. will you need to be available outside of office hours)
  - What other commitments do you already have for the year (work and other supervisory commitments)?
- Level of support they may require
  - What type of Honours is on offer and what level of support will you need to give in terms of one-on-one contact?
  - Do you work as a team in your area (so will others be expected to support them also)?
  - How much input will you need to have into their proposal (e.g. this may be quite a lot in a Creative Arts Honours vs a Chemistry Honours)?
  - How collaborative is the degree? How much time is needed and available to find appropriate collaborators?
- Bias
  - Do you or they have any bias that may need to be discussed or that may preclude either of you from this process?
Supervising an Honours Student
Once you have agreed to being an Honours supervisor, there will be a number of things you may be required to provide support on. You may start by providing some reading for the student on the project area and getting them to prepare a project outline. You should also orient them to the work area/s and provide the appropriate resourcing (e.g. this may include a desk, access to equipment, stationery etc).

Managing Meetings
Honours Supervisors may be required to supervise more than one student at a time. Consider how you will manage this process and how you will manage supervision meetings. Two common ways supervisors use to manage face-to-face meetings with students are group meetings or individual meetings.

Group meetings
Group meetings are good pedagogical strategy and an efficient way to organise your supervision. You could also consider combining with another supervisor to have group sessions if you only have a few students.

Advantages of group meetings:
- prevents repetition
- students gain additional insights into their own work, even when the focus is on other students
- eases students' stress and anxiety because it allows social comparison and reduces the stress of learning in isolation. It helps reinforce that independent study does not equal student isolation
- an emphasis on cooperation and collaboration when students share ideas and resources
- makes students more accountable when they are expected to report in a group environment and can motivate those who may be falling behind.

Issues that can be covered in group sessions:
- examples of good theses for student awareness of what they should be working towards
- reviewing core literature (e.g. research methodology)
- discussing theory and how it informs research
- teaching students how to write a research proposal (and providing examples of good proposals)
- discussing students' draft proposals
- exploring the nature of and evidence for critical thinking in a group
- giving students an opportunity to defend their decisions related to data management and analysis
- providing the opportunity to develop oral presentation skills.
**Individual meetings**

Even with using group sessions, there will still be some need to meet individually with students. These meetings should be regular and focused on particular tasks or issues relevant to the project stage. It can be helpful to arrange for the student to submit something in writing (progress report, questions, ideas, data and data analysis) before the meeting so you have time to return it with comments. This can form the basis of the meeting.

One-to-one meetings allow the supervisor to check that the student is on task by:

- a review and report on progress
- identifying any problems and assisting in problem-solving
- planning and modifying plans as necessary.

You can also help with motivation by:

- checking in with student
- encouragement
- developing and maintaining rapport.

Meetings can be structured for maximum effectiveness by:

- reviewing students' files prior to the meeting and checking any work, obligations etc.
- finding out students' views of their own progress
- checking back on mutual commitments
- considering what the student has submitted prior to the meeting. It is vital to establish the expectation that students must be prepared for your meetings (e.g. do you wish them to submit something in writing, such as outlines, explorations of ideas or a list of questions prior to meeting?)
- plan the next meeting.

Ideally, individual meetings should occur regularly. The timing between meetings will depend on the individual student and how they are progressing. Both group meetings and individual meetings can run concurrently.

**The Research Proposal**

There are a number of aspects of the research proposal you may need to provide guidance on. These may include formulating the research question, defining the project and any ethics issues/requirements.

**Formulating the question**

This can come from undergraduate work, existing projects or something personal that interests the student.

Consider:
• Research literature – what are the gaps in the area?
• Following up from existing research – is there pre-existing research the student can “piggy-back” onto to contribute more to the field?
• Addressing a controversial issue – is there anything topical or controversial that may suit?

**Defining the project**
The Honours thesis is small and must fit within a defined time frame and budget. Consider:

• Size - it needs to be a realistic and manageable
• Costs - what are the costs associated with the project including access to equipment, transport, interview transcriptions etc.
• Time management - what other commitments does the student have that need to be taken into consideration?

**Ethics**
Some Honours projects will have ethical issues. Consider:

• Involvement of animals, biohazards, people etc.
• Other ethics issues – is it within Flinders or do external bodies need to be applied to?
• How the ethics application aids in the definition of the project - while it can be a difficult process it is extremely helpful.

**The Literature review**
It is highly likely that you will need to have significant input into guiding your students through their literature review. Aspects to consider providing guidance on may include:

• Is the literature review appropriately following the conventions of the chosen methodology?
• Is it a reasonable length?
• Does it adequately cover the depth and breadth of the literature?

**Managing expectations and stress**
Honours is often a very difficult year for students. It may be their first real experience of working much more independently on their own project, or they may be working collaboratively as part of broader research team, each of which has its own stress. It is important to ensure that the student’s expectations are realistic. Supervisors may need to reassure students that a grade of less than a first class Honours is not a failure and reinforce that this is still a significant accomplishment.

Uncertainty sometimes stems from the student’s lack of understanding about what an Honours project entails. Providing students with examples of Honours theses as early as possible may help address this uncertainty.

Directing students to Honours handbooks which stipulate what is required may also help deal with uncertainty. These are available from school websites and/ or Honours Coordinators.

**Managing time**
Students may need to develop new skills and techniques to help manage time. The Student Learning Centre offers programs in time management. Other techniques include helping the student to develop timelines and break the project into smaller sections and budget time accordingly. You may also wish to:

- Monitor and keep track of students' progress (e.g. establish a folder for each student in which deadlines and goals are recorded as well as a note of how they are to be met)
- Encourage the student to begin writing as soon as possible.

References

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