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RETHINKING LAW HONOURS: VOCATIONAL MOTIVATIONS AND BARRIERS FOR HIGH-ACHIEVING LAW GRADUATES

AARON TIMOSHANKO*

I INTRODUCTION

The Bachelor of Laws (Honours) program ('LLBH') at the University of Southern Queensland ('UniSQ') attracts few eligible students. Despite offering a qualification that enhances critical analysis, legal research, and writing skills, only about 4 per cent of eligible UniSQ Bachelor of Laws ('LLB') students enrol. This low uptake raises questions about the program's perceived value and accessibility. This research project aims to investigate the underlying reasons for low enrolment in the LLBH program at UniSQ, focusing on the perspectives of recent UniSQ LLB graduates.

This research makes three original contributions. First, it provides the first empirical data directly linking Practical Legal Training ('PLT') to Honours enrolment, establishing a definitive vocational driver.¹ Second, it uses this evidence to refute the prevailing narrative of Honours as a primarily academic pathway, reframing it as a vehicle for professional advancement. Third, by focusing on the under-researched 'separate' Honours model, it offers a critical case study with broad implications for program design and national qualifications policy.

While half of all Australian law schools have an 'embedded' model, others offer a separate program (like UniSQ), and some an 'embedded pathway'. By examining the situation at UniSQ, this study contributes valuable data to the broader conversation about the future of Honours programs in Australian legal education.

This study focuses on four research questions:

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¹ Practical Legal Training (PLT) is a separate postgraduate course of study, specifically a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice, which is mandatory (in addition to the successful completion of a Bachelor of Laws (LLB)) if one seeks to practise law in Australia. Generative AI tools were used in researching/developing the article and the particular tools and methods are discussed in the Methodology section.

1. Of those respondents who completed or are currently completing their LLBH with UniSQ, what were the main factors they considered when deciding to do so?
2. What are the main reasons for not enrolling?
3. Is there a relationship between PLT and law Honours?
4. How can institutions with a separate Honours program increase enrolments?

This article will proceed as follows: Part II reviews the relevant literature on the unique role that Honours plays in the Australian legal education system, before examining the secondary materials discussing potential motivations and barriers students face in enrolling in an Honours program. Part III discusses the methodology of the research project. Part IV examines the results of the survey. Part V provides a discussion of the key findings and how they answer the research questions, including some limitations and suggestions for further research. Part VI concludes.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

A *The Development of Honours Programs in Australian Universities*

The Australian Bachelor Honours degree is a unique qualification, evolving from the United Kingdom.² The research-intensive nature of Honours degrees,³ including a substantial thesis component, has led to the view that Honours is a ‘research apprenticeship’ that qualifies graduates for entry into PhD programs.⁴ Despite the high regard for Honours degrees in Australian universities, though, the qualification has received little attention as a topic of research.⁵

Until 2011, law Honours were typically awarded based on high marks within a standard LLB.⁶ However, the Australian Qualifications

² Elisa Backer and Pierre Benckendorff, ‘Australian Honours Degrees: The Last Bastion of Quality?’ (2018) 36 (September) *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* 49, 49.

³ Ibid 50.

⁴ Ibid 49–50.

⁵ Ibid 49; Kelley Burton, Julian Laurens and Judith Marychurch, ‘Reviewing Honours and Distinction in 21st Century Australian Law Schools: Is the Diversity of Approaches Corroding Its Market Relevance?’ (2021) 13/14 *Journal of the Australasian Law Academics Association* 30; Louise Horstmanhof and Bill Boyd, ‘W(h)ither the Honours Degree in Australian Universities?’ (2019) 61(2) *Australian Universities’ Review* 14, 17; Margaret Kiley et al, *The Role of Honours in Contemporary Australian Higher Education* (Final Report, Australian Learning and Teaching Council, May 2009) 4.

⁶ Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *Australian Qualifications Framework* (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 1st ed, 2011) 48–50 (‘AQF 1st ed’); noting that the AQF specification for Honours Bachelor Degree did not substantively change between the 1st and 2nd editions: Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *Australian Qualifications Framework* (2nd ed, 2013) 50–52 (‘AQF 2nd ed’); but see Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 31; Nick James,

Framework (AQF) released in 2011 specified Honours degrees as level 8 qualifications, above level 7 Bachelor degrees.⁷ This change prompted law schools across Australia to introduce a discrete year of study for Honours degrees to demonstrate more advanced knowledge and skill requirements specified in the new AQF Level 8.⁸ The AQF Level 8 descriptor specifies that Honours graduates must demonstrate systematic and critical understanding of a complex body of knowledge, mastery of theoretical knowledge, and the capacity to independently design and conduct research investigations — competencies that explicitly exceed those required of a Level 7 LLB graduate. It is on this basis that law Honours can be said to produce graduates with advanced analytical and research capabilities of meaningful value to the legal profession and, by extension, the national economy. This change, coupled with pragmatic concerns about market differentiation, resulted in a significant diversity in Honours programs at different universities.⁹

The lack of a unified national approach has created confusion about law Honours, both within and outside of Australia, potentially disadvantaging Australian students applying to international PhD programs.¹⁰ Domestically, students and employers are also confused by the different approaches.¹¹ Some employers in the legal sector no longer see Honours as a ‘reliable indicator’ of graduate quality because of the varied ways Honours in law is awarded across Australia.¹²

B Honours Programs in Australian Law Schools

At present, law Honours programs are classified as either embedded, embedded pathway or separate. Half of Australian law schools (n = 19 or 50 per cent) have embedded Honours into their LLB.¹³ This means all graduates of such programs will be awarded

‘RIP LLB (Hons)’, *The Centre for Professional Legal Education* (Blog Post, 7 May 2020) <<https://thecple.wordpress.com/2020/05/08/rip-llb-hons/>>.

⁷ Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 31; Deirdre Barron and Margaret Zeegers, ‘Honours in Australia: Globally Recognised Preparation for a Career in Research (or Elsewhere)’ (2012) 13(2) *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 35, 39; Backer and Benckendorff (n 2).

⁸ See Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 31, 34; Backer and Benckendorff (n 2) 50; Horstmannshof and Boyd (n 5) 16.

⁹ Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 31, 32, 37, 38, 43; Backer and Benckendorff (n 2) 50; Barron and Zeegers (n 7) 39, 43; Margaret Zeegers and Deirdre Barron, ‘Honours: A Taken-for-Granted Pathway to Research?’ (2009) 57(5) *Higher Education* 567, 573; James (n 6).

¹⁰ Barron and Zeegers (n 7) 35, 43; Backer and Benckendorff (n 2) 55; Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 44; Kiley et al (n 5) 21–2.

¹¹ Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 44; James (n 6).

¹² James (n 6); see also Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 42.

¹³ This approach is utilised by institutions such as The University of Sydney, ‘Bachelor of Laws (LLB)’ (Web Page) <<https://www.sydney.edu.au/law/study-law/undergraduate.html>>; Australian National University, ‘Bachelor of Laws (Honours)’ (Web Page) <<https://law.anu.edu.au/study/bachelor-laws-honours>>; The University of Queensland, ‘Bachelor of Laws (Honours)’ (Web Page) <<https://study.uq.edu.au/study-options/programs/bachelor-laws->

some level of Honours.¹⁴ Six law schools (16 per cent) offer an embedded Honours pathway, which gives students who meet the GPA requirements the option to select additional courses during their studies to graduate with Honours.¹⁵ Eight law schools (21 per cent) offer separate Honours programs.¹⁶ These programs require enrolment into a new Honours program for an additional period of study after completing the LLB.¹⁷ It should be noted, however, that these categories do not fully capture the variation that exists within each type. This is particularly evident among embedded programs, where some institutions confer Honours on all graduates as a standard feature of the program, while others require students to satisfy additional academic requirements and complete designated research-based electives. The University of Newcastle, for instance, graduates all LLB students with Honours,¹⁸ whereas the University of Sydney and the University of Technology Sydney require students to meet specific academic thresholds and undertake research-focused coursework to qualify.¹⁹

honours-2471>. Please see the Appendix for a list of all the universities offering an embedded Honours degree.

¹⁴ Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 35.

¹⁵ Law schools employing this approach include Bond University, 'Law Honours / Distinction Information' (Web Page) <<https://bond.edu.au/law-honours-distinction-information>>; James Cook University, 'Law Honours Program - CBLG' (Web Page) <<https://www.jcu.edu.au/college-of-business-law-and-governance/law/law-honours-program>>; Macquarie University, 'Bachelor of Law (Honours)' (Web Page) <<https://www.mq.edu.au/faculty-of-arts/schools/macquarie-law-school/study-with-us/bachelor-of-law-honours>>. Please see the Appendix for a list of all the universities within an embedded pathway.

¹⁶ This includes Charles Sturt University which offers a separate Honours program, but is not an LLBH, but rather a general Honours.

¹⁷ University of Southern Queensland, 'Bachelor of Laws (Honours)' (Web Page) <<https://www.unisq.edu.au/study/degrees-and-courses/bachelor-of-laws-honours>>; Charles Darwin University, 'Bachelor of Laws Honours (VLAWH2)' (Web Page, 2026) <<https://www.cdu.edu.au/study/course/bachelor-laws-honours-vlawh2>>; Curtin University, 'Bachelor of Laws (Honours)' (Web Page) <<https://www.curtin.edu.au/study/offering/course-ug-bachelor-of-laws-honours-bh-laws>>; Deakin University, 'Bachelor of Laws (Honours)' (Web Page) <<https://www.deakin.edu.au/course/bachelor-laws-honours>>. Arguably, this Honours program could be categorised as an embedded pathway. However, as it is recorded on Deakin University website as a separate one-year program, it has been classified as a separate honours program for the purposes of analysis; Edith Cowan University, 'Bachelor of Laws Honours' (Web Page) <<https://www.ecu.edu.au/degrees/courses/bachelor-of-laws-honours>>; Murdoch University, 'Law Honours' (Web Page) <<https://www.murdoch.edu.au/course/honours/h1267>>; Southern Cross University, 'Bachelor of Laws with Honours' (Web Page, 2025) <<https://www.scu.edu.au/study/courses/bachelor-of-laws-with-honours-3508002>>; Charles Sturt University, 'Bachelor of Applied Research (Honours)' (Web Page) <<https://study.csu.edu.au/courses/bachelor-applied-research-honours#entry-requirements>>.

¹⁸ The University of Newcastle, 'Bachelor of Laws (Honours)', *Handbook* (Web Page, 2026) <<https://handbook.newcastle.edu.au/program/2026/12348?year=2026>>.

¹⁹ The University of Sydney, 'Bachelor of Laws - Honours', *Handbooks* (Web Page) <<https://www.sydney.edu.au/handbooks/law/undergraduate/honours.html>>; University of Technology Sydney, 'LLB Students', *Undergraduate Research Thesis* (Web Page, 2026) <<https://www.uts.edu.au/for-students/current->

This internal variation has significant implications for the credential's value as a signal to employers and students, a point taken up further in Part II.D.3. The case study for this paper, UniSQ, offers a one-year separate program that uniquely provides recognition of prior learning for PLT.²⁰ A total of five law schools (13 per cent) offer no Honours program in law.²¹

C *Student Motivations for Undertaking Honours*

Existing, though limited, literature identifies several key motivations for undertaking Honours.

1 *Career and Employability*

Students often believe graduating with an Honours degree will improve their career and employability prospects. In 2000, Hawes found that the 'major reasons' students across the University enrolled in Honours was to improve job opportunities and due to an interest in the subject.²² This is supported by Singleton, who found that 83 per cent of social science students considering Honours rated 'To enhance my employment opportunities' as important.²³ Similarly, in a study of 99 academics across Australian business schools and faculties, 'Improved career prospects' was perceived to be one of the most significant motivators for students.²⁴

2 *Research Pathway*

The traditional motivation for Honours is as a direct pathway to academic research. Burton, Laurens and Marychurch note that law Honours has historically been the main route into higher degree-by-research programs.²⁵ In 2018, Backer and Benckendorff found that most academics in Australian business schools believed the reason for

students/managing-your-course/current-students-information-law/honours-and-research/llb-students>.

²⁰ University of Southern Queensland (n 17).

²¹ This includes the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Australia, who only offer law as a postgraduate degree (AQF9): see The University of Melbourne, 'Law Degrees and Study Options' (Web Page)

<<https://study.unimelb.edu.au/find/study-areas/law/>>; The University of Western Australia, 'Law' (Web Page) <<https://www.uwa.edu.au/study/areas/law>>. The remaining institutions, namely Central Queensland University, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, have chosen not to offer Honours in law.

²² C Hawes, 'Honours Study at Flinders University: Perspectives of Students and Coordinators' (2000) 22(3) *HERDSA News* 28, 28: of the 441 students enrolled in honours in semester 1 1999, 178 students completed the survey. The majority of respondents were female, aged between 19 and 45 years old, and enrolled full-time.

²³ Andrew Singleton, 'Why Social Science Students Choose to do Honours' in Stewart Lockie et al (eds), *The Future of Sociology* (The Australian Sociological Association, 2009) 1, 7 <<https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/why-social-science-students-choose-to-do-honours>>.

²⁴ Backer and Benckendorff (n 2) 53.

²⁵ Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 33.

students undertaking Honours was as a pathway to a PhD.²⁶ The 2009 report by Kiley et al similarly indicates that a significant proportion of Honours students (not limited to law) plan to pursue a research degree in the future.²⁷ Furthermore, Singleton discovered that 66 percent of undergraduate social science students rated 'To open doors to postgraduate study' as important or very important, positioning it as the 7th most significant motivation among 16 overall.²⁸

3 *Personal Development*

Students also have intrinsic motivations related to intellectual and personal development. The Hawes study mentions 'interest in the subject,' 'intellectual stimulation,' and 'personal fulfilment' as key factors driving law and non-law students' decision to undertake Honours.²⁹ The desire 'To learn more about other areas of my major discipline' (92 per cent) and 'To study more deeply a particular area' (82 per cent) were the first and third most common reasons cited by social science students considering Honours in the Singleton study.³⁰ The fourth most common reason (at 77 per cent) provided in the Singleton study was students 'looking for a sense of personal achievement'.³¹ Similarly, other research finds that many students see Honours as an opportunity for 'Academic Enrichment,' allowing them to engage with a subject in greater depth than is possible in an undergraduate degree, as noted by Kiley et al.³² This involves a significant pedagogical shift, where students transition from being 'knowledge acquirers' to 'knowledge producers', a process explored by Manathunga et al.³³

4 *External or Pragmatic Considerations*

The prestige and formal recognition associated with an Honours degree may also be a significant motivator. Professor Nick James describes law Honours as historically a 'badge' of distinction.³⁴ James quotes an employer from a major law firm who described the award of Honours as 'a point of real distinction and something which stands for quality and effort; something which a person could and should take particular pride in'.³⁵ This perception is also evident outside law, with the Singleton study finding that 83 per cent of prospective social science

²⁶ Backer and Benckendorff (n 2) 53 with 69 per cent of respondents rating it 'very important'.

²⁷ Kiley et al (n 5) 17.

²⁸ Singleton (n 23) 7.

²⁹ Hawes (n 22) 28.

³⁰ Singleton (n 23) 7.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kiley et al (n 5) 17.

³³ Catherine Manathunga et al, 'From Knowledge Acquisition to Knowledge Production: Issues with Australian Honours Curricula' (2012) 17(2) *Teaching in Higher Education* 139, 149.

³⁴ James (n 6).

³⁵ Ibid; see also Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 43.

students considered ‘To add to the prestige of my degree’ an important factor.³⁶ The study by Backer and Benckendorff also provides useful evidence from the perspective of academics. They found that ‘Recognition of performance’ was perceived by academics to be an important motivator for students enrolling in Honours programs.³⁷ Their research also captured qualitative comments from academics who described a First Class Honours degree as ‘very prestigious’ within academia, although some questioned its credibility and prestige in the broader job market.³⁸

D *Potential Barriers to Honours Enrolment*

No research was found that empirically examines law students’ barriers to pursuing Honours. As noted by Burton, Laurens, and Marychurch, there is ‘a lack of robust contemporaneous research around Honours programs generally in the Australian context’³⁹ and argue that ‘[c]ritically understanding the implications of this across multiple spheres requires further nuanced and sensitive research’.⁴⁰ However, research from other disciplines suggests four main categories of barriers.

1 *Financial Impact*

Students face a significant financial cost when enrolling in a new degree,⁴¹ including a separate law Honours program. This impact includes reduced earning capacity. Singleton found the desire to seek paid work was the primary reason social sciences students did not undertake Honours.⁴² Course fees payable also present a direct financial impact. While many Australian Honours programs qualify for the Federal Government’s low-interest loan scheme (HECS), students must repay this debt via payroll deductions (if their income exceeds the threshold) or tax returns. Prospective LLBH students may already be repaying HECS debt from their undergraduate degrees, making them hesitant to incur more debt. Consequently, pursuing a separate Honours

³⁶ Singleton (n 23) 7.

³⁷ Backer and Benckendorff (n 2) 53.

³⁸ Ibid 54.

³⁹ Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid 44.

⁴¹ Backer and Benckendorff (n 2) 50–1; Louise Pigden and Francis Jegede, ‘Combined Degrees & Employability: A Comparative Analysis of Single and Joint Honours Graduates of UK Universities’ (Conference Paper, 2016 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings, The West East Institute, 2016) 22, 27 <<https://www.westeastinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/louise-pigden.pdf>>.

⁴² Singleton (n 23) 9 reported 76 per cent of respondents cited the pursuit of paid employment as either a reason or part reason for not undertaking Honours. The data from this study consisted of 80 social science undergraduates at one of Australia’s Group of Eight universities.

program in law may be difficult to justify for those in full-time legal employment or where Honours benefits are unclear.⁴³

2 *Time Commitment and Competing Priorities*

Time commitment is also a significant barrier. Competing priorities were evident in a 2000 study that found that older students, particularly females, were 'much more likely to have employment and family commitments that placed significant restrictions on their time for study'.⁴⁴ Recent LLB or PLT graduates may relish the guilt-free time away from studying, meaning prospective Honours students might hesitate to pursue law Honours without clear benefits.

3 *Unclear Purpose and the 'Signalling Problem'*

The purpose of law Honours remains unclear, with no commonly agreed definition. Is it designed to prepare students for an advanced legal career as a practitioner, or prepare them for a higher research degree?⁴⁵ The lack of a nationally agreed upon purpose undermines the value of an Honours degree.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the different models for awarding law Honours leads to confusion among students and employers, a phenomenon Nick James refers to as a 'signalling problem'.⁴⁷ Law Honours, awarded post-2013, suffers from this 'signalling problem' because one cannot easily ascertain whether the student 'performed well academically, or it may mean that they completed an Honours thesis and advanced level elective subjects, or it may mean that they attended a Law school that awards Honours to all of its graduates'.⁴⁸ Honours in law is no longer the 'reliable indicator of academic ability' that it once was, which risks devaluing the qualification.⁴⁹

4 *Perceived Demands and Stress*

One of the main reasons students do not attempt Honours is it is perceived to be very difficult and stressful.⁵⁰ A 2000 study reported that students found Honours 'worthwhile' yet 'extremely challenging' and 'isolating and alienating'.⁵¹ Manathunga et al summarised the

⁴³ See Pigden and Jegede (n 41) 7 of single and joint honours graduates of UK universities.

⁴⁴ Hawes (n 22) 28–9.

⁴⁵ See Barron and Zeegers (n 7) 42.

⁴⁶ James (n 6).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid; see also Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 42.

⁵⁰ Mullins, G, *Progression from Honours to Postgraduate Research* (Unpublished to the Board of Research Degrees, University of Adelaide, 2004) and Mullins, G, 'What Prompts Honours Students to Go on to Postgraduate Research?' (Presentation, Quality in Postgraduate Research: Knowledge Creation in Testing Times Conference, 2006), cited in Kiley et al (n 5) 4.

⁵¹ Hawes (n 22) 29.

experience of non-law Honours students as a ‘high pressured and, at times brutal, preparation for the world of knowledge production’ due to the coursework components of these degrees.⁵²

E *Relationship between PLT and Honours*

There is no literature discussing a relationship between PLT and law Honours. However, the literature does discuss the tension between preparing students for professional practice and research training within Honours generally.⁵³ Briefly, the concern is that professionally orientated Honours programs focus on producing job-ready graduates, rather than developing research skills, as Barron and Zeegers state.⁵⁴

The lack of literature exploring the relationship between PLT and law Honours is an important gap that this research aims to address. A relationship between PLT and Honours is important for understanding the purpose of law Honours. If a significant percentage of Honours graduates have undertaken PLT, this strongly suggests that Honours is perceived as improving employment prospects for graduate lawyer roles.⁵⁵

F *Theoretical Framework*

To understand the decision-making process regarding LLBH enrolment, this study employs an integrated human capital and expectancy theories framework.

Human capital theory, pioneered by economists Becker and Schultz, conceptualises education as an investment decision where individuals weigh costs against expected future returns.⁵⁶ The theory is relevant because it explains how students might weigh direct costs (tuition fees, study materials) and opportunity costs (foregone income, reduced work hours, time away from family commitments) against potential benefits (career advancement, higher earnings potential, personal fulfilment). In the specific context of separate Honours programs in law, human capital theory suggests that students would be more likely to enrol when:

1. The perceived benefits clearly outweigh the costs

⁵² Manathunga et al (n 33) 146.

⁵³ Barron and Zeegers (n 7) 35, 42; Horstmanshof and Boyd (n 5) 14; Zeegers and Barron (n 9) 573; Manathunga et al (n 33) 145; see also Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 41.

⁵⁴ Barron and Zeegers (n 7) 35, 42; Manathunga et al (n 33) 145; see also Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 41.

⁵⁵ Margaret Kiley et al, ‘Honouring the Incomparable: Honours in Australian Universities’ (2011) 62(5) *Higher Education* 619, 626; Kiley et al (n 5) 17.

⁵⁶ Gary S Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education, First Edition* (NBER, 1964) 75, 75, 121 <<https://www.nber.org/books-and-chapters/human-capital-theoretical-and-empirical-analysis-special-reference-education-first-edition>>; Theodore W Schultz, ‘Investment in Human Capital’ (1961) 51(1) *American Economic Review* 1, 1, 8, 12.

2. The program structure minimises opportunity costs (e.g., through RPL for PLT)
3. The returns on investment are tangible and relatively certain

As Schultz notes, educational investments become increasingly difficult to justify when students have already secured employment in their chosen field, as the opportunity costs rise significantly and the 'payoff period' is shorter the more established their career.⁵⁷

An important contextual qualification applies when employing human capital theory in the Australian setting. Becker and Schultz's foundational work was developed primarily in the American context, where substantial upfront tuition costs render direct financial returns a highly salient factor in educational investment decisions. In Australia, the HECS-HELP income-contingent loan scheme defers and partially subsidises the direct cost of higher education, reducing its psychological salience for students at the point of enrolment. The Commonwealth's Job Ready Graduates scheme offers an instructive parallel: its deliberate restructuring of student contribution rates, designed to redirect enrolment towards STEM disciplines through price signals, did not produce the anticipated changes in student behaviour, suggesting that direct cost manipulation may not reliably drive educational decisions in the Australian context. Human capital theory is therefore applied in this study primarily through the lens of opportunity costs (e.g. foregone income, delayed career entry, and the compounding effect of additional study for graduates who have already secured employment) rather than direct tuition costs. This framing is especially applicable to separate Honours programs such as UniSQ's, where the Honours decision is made post-graduation (often after the student has already secured employment as a legal practitioner) at precisely the point when Schultz's observation about rising opportunity costs is most acute. For embedded programs, the additional time cost of Honours is real but is embedded in the initial university selection decision, made before the student has entered the workforce, when opportunity costs are considerably lower.

While human capital theory addresses the economic rationality of educational decisions, expectancy theory provides insight into the psychological and motivational aspects of these choices.⁵⁸ This theory posits that motivation is determined by three factors: expectancy (belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (belief that performance leads to desired outcomes) and valence (the value placed on those outcomes).⁵⁹

Applied to LLBH enrolment decisions, expectancy theory suggests that students are motivated to undertake Honours when they:

⁵⁷ Schultz (n 56) 14.

⁵⁸ Victor H Vroom, *Work and Motivation* (John Wiley & Sons, 1964).

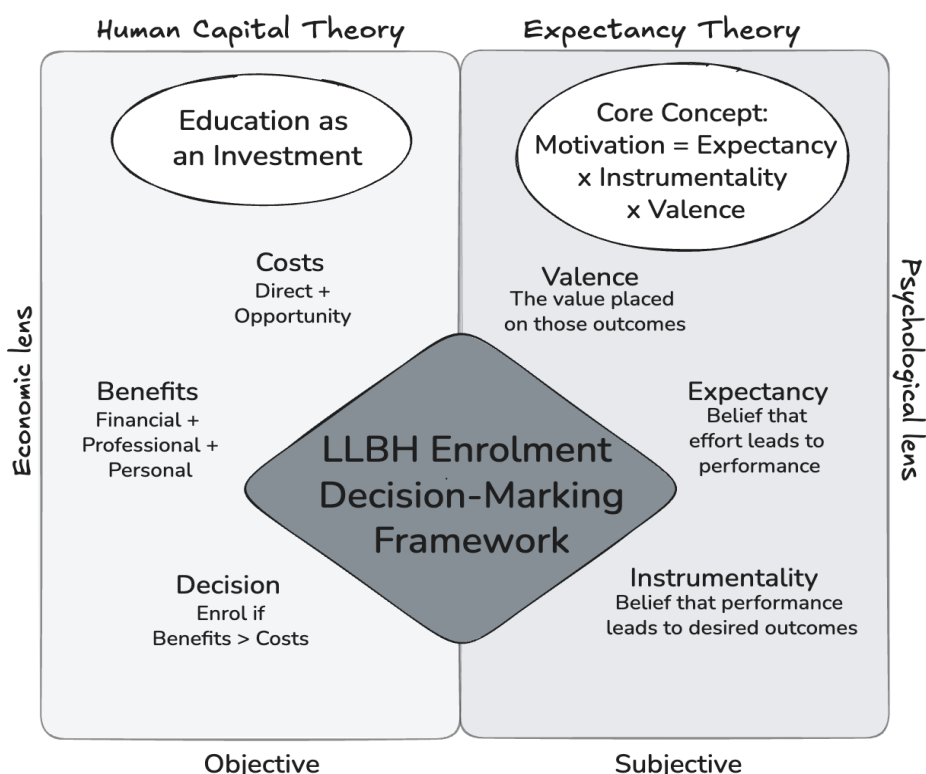
⁵⁹ *Ibid* 18, 20, 21.

1. Believe they can successfully complete the program (expectancy)
2. Perceive a clear connection between program completion and valued outcomes such as career advancement or personal achievement (instrumentality)
3. Place high value on these outcomes (valence)

If any of these factors is low, motivation diminishes. For example, if students do not perceive a clear connection between Honours completion and enhanced employability (low instrumentality), they will be less motivated to pursue the program regardless of their confidence in their ability to complete it.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analysing LLBH enrolment decisions. Human capital theory explains the rational economic calculations underlying educational choices, while expectancy theory illuminates the psychological processes that influence motivation and decision-making. This integrated approach allows us to examine both objective factors (costs, benefits, market conditions) and subjective elements (perceptions, beliefs, values) that shape students' choices regarding Honours enrolment.

The Figure below presents a conceptual model of how these theories interact in the context of LLBH enrolment decisions.



III METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, using an online survey that combined quantitative and qualitative data to investigate Honours enrolment factors.⁶⁰ This approach facilitates complementarity between empirical measurement of values or perceptions while also capturing nuanced, contextual insights through open-ended responses.⁶¹ The study received ethical approval from UniSQ's Human Research Ethics Committee (ETH2024-0912).

The research design was informed by the integrated theoretical framework combining human capital theory and expectancy theory.⁶² Survey questions were structured to capture elements of both frameworks:

1. Human capital considerations: questions addressing financial costs, time commitment, perceived career benefits, and opportunity costs were designed to examine how participants balanced investment costs against expected returns.
2. Expectancy theory elements: questions exploring participants' confidence in their ability to complete the program (expectancy), perceived connection between Honours and desired outcomes (instrumentality), and the value placed on these outcomes (valence) were included to assess motivational factors.

The mixed-methods approach was particularly well-suited to exploring these theoretical dimensions, as quantitative data provided measurable indicators of cost-benefit calculations, while qualitative responses offered deeper insights into participants' subjective perceptions and values. This theoretical grounding also informed the thematic analysis of qualitative data, with codes developed to identify key concepts from both theories.

Of the 125 who started the survey, 66 provided responses sufficiently complete for analysis. The participants were recruited from a cohort of 221 eligible alumni who had graduated from the UniSQ LLB between Semester 1, 2020, and Trimester 1, 2024, with a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 5.0 or higher, which satisfies the admission criteria for UniSQ Honours.⁶³ While the response rate of almost 30 per cent (66

⁶⁰ John W Creswell and Vicki L Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (Sage, 2nd ed, 2011) 71.

⁶¹ *Ibid* 62, 71, 77.

⁶² Becker (n 56) 75, 121; Schultz (n 56) 1, 8, 12; Vroom (n 58) 18, 20, 21.

⁶³ The UniSQ LLBH program comprises eight credit points: four mandatory units comprising research training and a supervised research dissertation, plus four further units consisting of either law elective courses or, for eligible students, credit awarded for the completion of an approved Practical Legal Training (PLT) program. There are two admission pathways. The first, and more common, pathway requires completion of the LLB with a minimum GPA of 5.0, with PLT credit then available to satisfy four of the eight required credit points. The second pathway is available to students who, upon completing their third-year upper-level LLB topics, have

from 221) is a potential limitation, and non-response bias cannot be ruled out, the over-representation of LLBH graduates (discussed below) may offer a partial counter-balance. Eligible participants were contacted via email with an initial invitation and two reminders.

The anonymous survey,⁶⁴ which took approximately 10 minutes to complete, included questions to gather information regarding their Honours and PLT status, employment status, and perceptions of the LLBH program and Honours in law generally. Survey questions were developed based on the literature review. While the survey instrument was reviewed for clarity and comprehensibility by several individuals, resource constraints prevented formal validation through cognitive interviews or pilot testing with a sample from the target population. Informed consent was obtained on the survey's landing page.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The use of inferential statistics was not possible due to the low number of LLBH graduates ($n = 11$). Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analysed using a thematic analysis.

Artificial intelligence (AI) was utilised to support several stages of this research project, including the development and debugging of R scripts used for the quantitative statistical analysis, synthesising existing research to identify key themes from academic sources and drafting initial versions of research communications, including the survey invitation email. The author maintains full responsibility for the academic integrity and conclusions of this study.

IV RESULTS

Of the 66 respondents, 11 (16.7 per cent) had completed or were enrolled in the UniSQ law Honours program.⁶⁵ This is an over-representation based on the initial data set provided from the graduations team. The total number of all law graduations from 2017 to 2024 was 747 consisting of 719 LLB graduations and just 28 LLBH graduations or 3.75 per cent. Of the 719 LLB graduates, 356 were eligible for the LLBH as they had a GPA of 5.0 or above.⁶⁶ Only 15 of the 28 LLBH graduates had matriculated from the UniSQ LLB, meaning that 46.43 per cent of LLBH graduates completed their LLB at another university. Therefore, only 4.21 per cent of eligible UniSQ LLB graduates go on to study their LLBH at UniSQ. The over-representation of LLBH graduates in this study means the data could be

achieved a GPA of 5.2 in those subjects, with at least one result at distinction level or above. The Honours classification awarded is determined by the student's grade point average across the program courses undertaken at UniSQ (i.e. excluding the results from PLT providers).

⁶⁴ A copy of the survey instrument and the results are available at the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/4j6fz/>. All participants provided informed consent and were assured that their responses were anonymous and used only for research purposes.

⁶⁵ The survey data are available at the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/4j6fz/>.

⁶⁶ Of the 356 LLB graduations between 2017 and 2024, 221 occurred between 2020 and 2024.

skewed by self-selection bias, possibly contributing to an underestimation of potential barriers and reduced generalisability.

The average program duration for the LLBH, which is offered 1 year full-time or 2 years part-time, was 1.78 years, reflecting a high proportion of part-time enrolments.

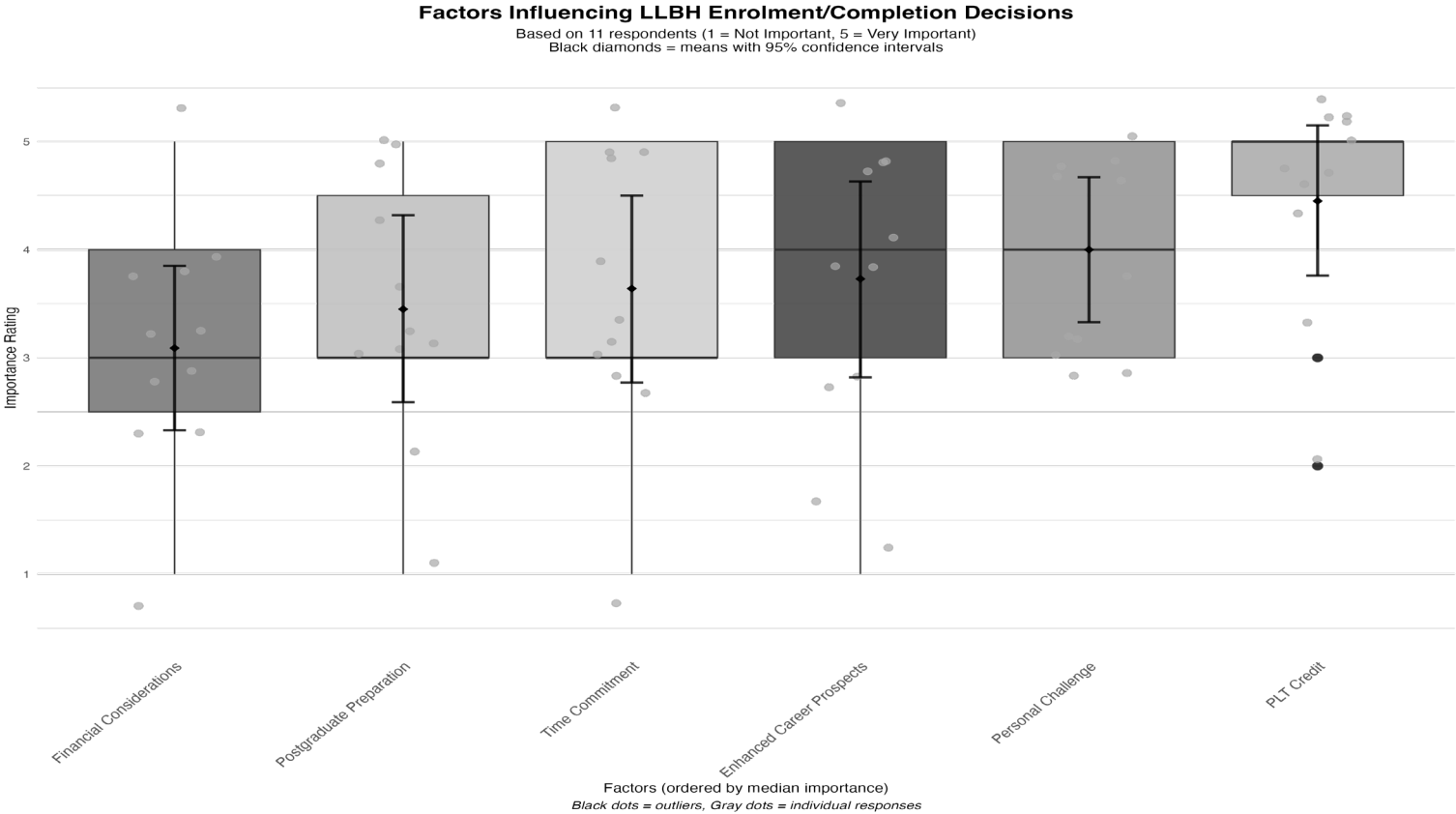
Of the 55 respondents who have not done Honours, 54.5 per cent ($n = 30$) were unlikely to undertake it in the future. Of these, 36.4 per cent were 'Not at all likely' to enrol in Honours.⁶⁷ Only 16.4 per cent were somewhat or very likely to undertake Honours ($n = 9$). Almost a third ($n = 16$, 29.1 per cent) were neutral or unsure.

A *Why LLBH Graduates Enrolled?*

For LLBH graduates, and those currently enrolled, the most significant factor was the recognition of prior learning ('RPL') credits awarded for completing PLT. All 11 respondents had completed (or were undertaking) their PLT. Although PLT graduates can choose not to apply for RPL, the author is unaware of any student ever doing so in the program. Credits awarded for the completion of PLT are equivalent to half of the units needed for the LLBH at UniSQ, translating to four credit points within an eight credit point program. Consequently, this can shorten the program duration for full-time enrolment from one year to six months.

On a 5-point Likert scale, the mean ($\bar{x}$) score for 'PLT credit' as an enrolment factor was 4.45.

⁶⁷ The remaining 18.2 per cent of respondents ($n = 10$) expressing a negative sentiment were 'somewhat unlikely' to do so.



The next most significant factor was personal challenge ($\bar{x} = 4.0$), slightly above enhanced career prospects ($\bar{x} = 3.73$). Qualitative survey comments from non-LLBH respondents support this finding. For example, Respondent 16 said that they were not sure 'how the honours could improve their job opportunities'. Respondent 32 identified the need to 'Perhaps provide insight into how valuable it is to future employers.' Finally, Respondent 97 said, 'I guess if I was to outlay the money (and time to complete the study) I'd want to know that such a qualification would result in better remuneration, better job prospects etc.'

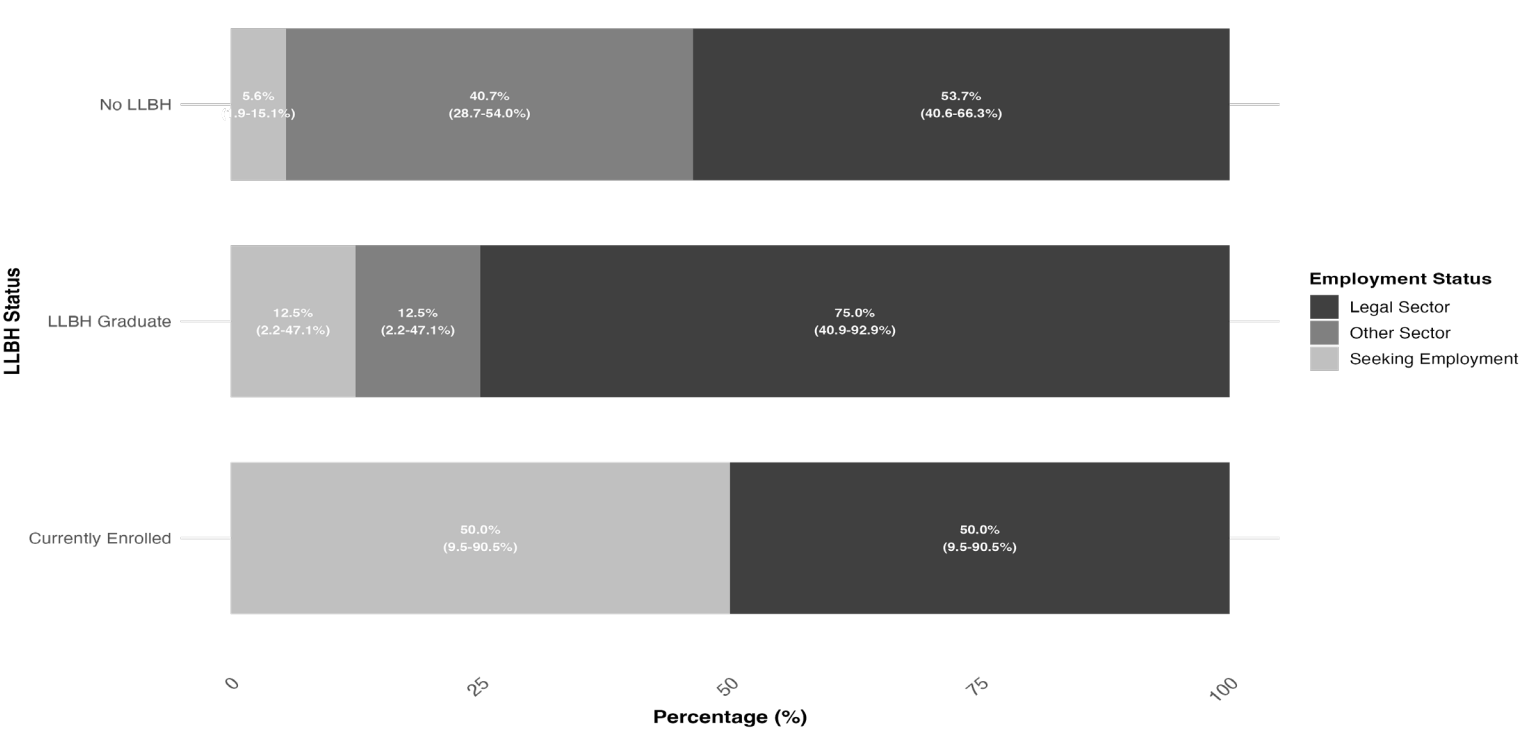
Time commitment and financial considerations were ranked fourth and sixth, respectively, out of six factors presented to respondents. It is expected that those who completed LLBH would not rank these factors highly. Perhaps most surprisingly, 'postgraduate preparation' was not a significant factor, with a mean ($\bar{x}$) of 3.45. This challenges the conventional belief that Honours is a pathway for further postgraduate study.

Other stated factors include prestige. Respondent 25 stated, 'I wanted to have on my CV ... that I had received an LLB (1st class)', while Respondent 33 said that they wanted their 'degree to be on par with the sandstone uni programs.' The remaining responses detailed the deferral of their study due to family commitments (ID:12), convenience of the campus location (ID:44), and the desire to expand their knowledge in a particular area of interest (ID:53).

Analysis of the employment status of LLB versus LLBH graduates shows that LLBH graduates are more likely to be working in the legal sector.

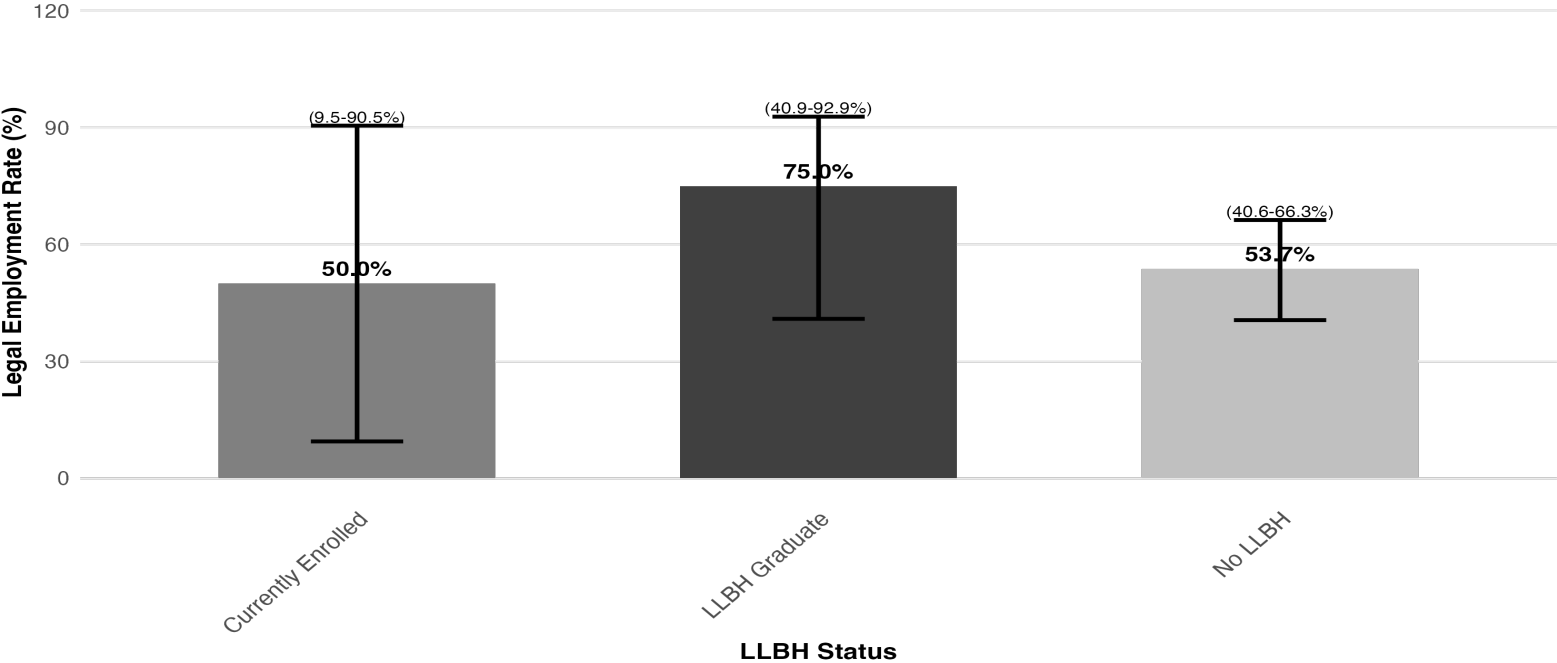
Employment Status by LLBH Completion Status

Percentage distribution of employment status for LLBH graduates, currently enrolled, and non-LLBH students
(95% confidence intervals shown in parentheses)



Legal Sector Employment Rate by LLBH Status

Percentage of respondents employed in legal sector roles
(95% confidence intervals shown as error bars and below)



The above bar charts suggest that those working in the legal sector are more likely to have completed an LLBH. This equates to a 21.3 percentage point increase in legal sector employment compared to non-LLBH graduates. However, propensity score matching analysis revealed this difference was largely due to selection bias rather than causal treatment effects. This was based on 1:1 nearest neighbour propensity score matching to control for selection bias on observable characteristics including PLT completion status, pre-LLBH employment sector, and graduation period. The matching achieved perfect balance on all matching variables. In the matched sample ($n=14$), both LLBH and control groups showed identical employment outcomes: 71.4 per cent legal employment rate and identical employment quality scores. The average treatment effect was 0 percentage points (95 per cent CI: -48.8 per cent to +48.4 per cent). Therefore, LLBH enrolment showed no significant effect on employment outcome.

All respondents were also asked to evaluate the perception of law Honours generally in the 'job market'.⁶⁸ The results support the conclusion that Honours doesn't necessarily increase one's chances of working in the legal sector. Of all 66 respondents, almost 40 per cent ($n = 25$) viewed Honours as having 'low' or 'very low' value in the job market. Respondents' employment status did not appear to impact their perception of the value of Honours in law in the job market. Thirty-six respondents employed in the legal sector rated law Honours a mean score of 2.75, similar to the 2.74 score from 23 outside the legal sector. Those seeking employment rated it higher at 3.20, though this is based on just five responses. Honours graduates have a significantly higher perception of the employment value ($\bar{x} = 4.0$) compared to non-LLBH graduates ($\bar{x} = 2.56$). This may reflect some aspect of cognitive dissonance or confirmation bias.⁶⁹

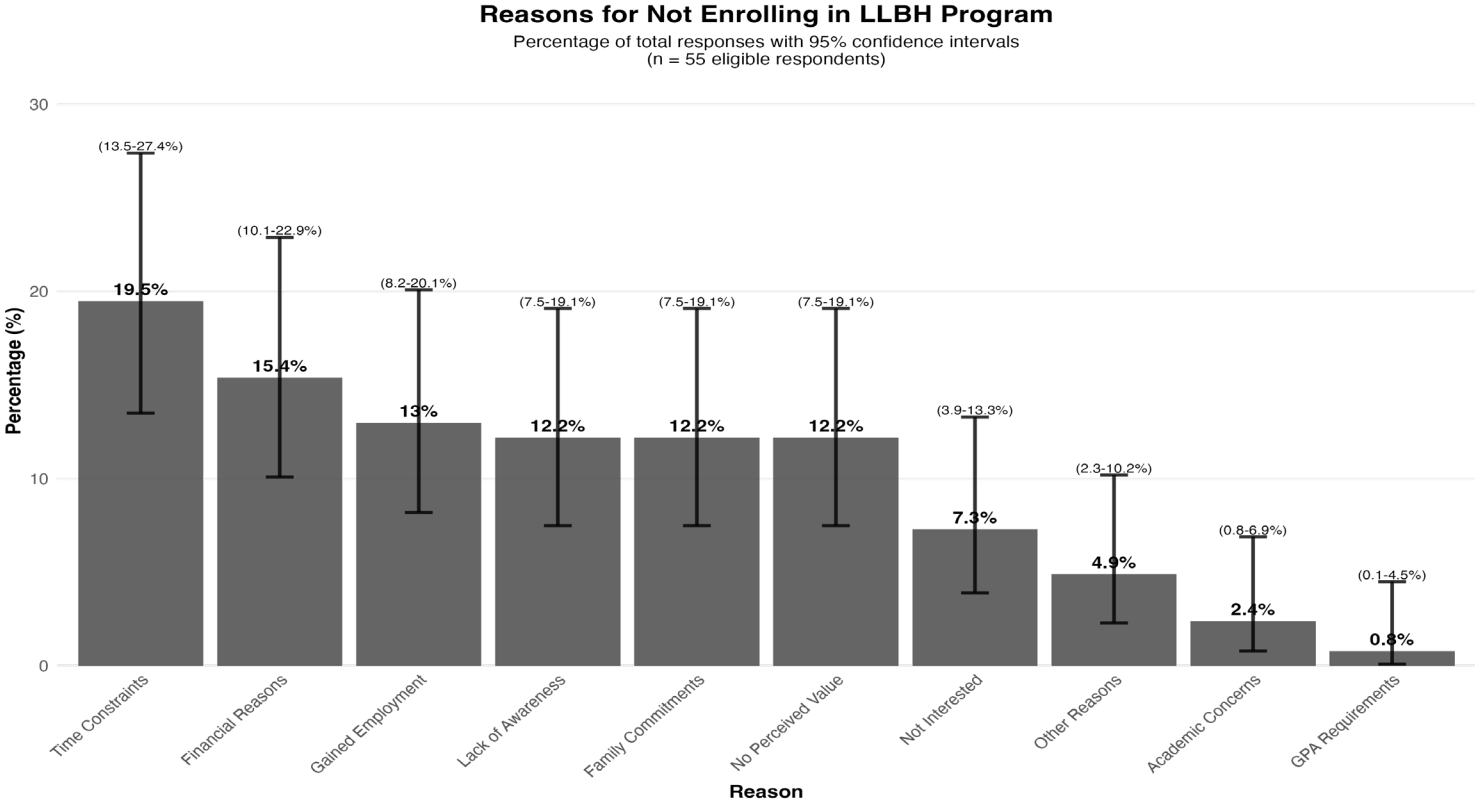
B Barriers to Honours Enrolment

Consistent with the literature, the most significant barriers were 'time constraints' (19.5 per cent, $n = 24$) and 'financial reasons' (15.4 per cent, $n = 19$). However, the confidence intervals demonstrate considerable uncertainty in these estimates given the sample size.

⁶⁸ The term 'job market' was used to acknowledge that not all graduates want to go into legal practice.

⁶⁹ Raymond S Nickerson, 'Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises' (1998) 2(2) *Review of General Psychology* 175, 187 on the 'primacy effect and belief persistence'; Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957) 22 on actively seeking 'new information that would reduce the total dissonance and, at the same time, to avoid new information that might increase the existing dissonance'; Elliot Aronson, 'The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: A Current Perspective' in Leonard Berkowitz (ed), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Academic Press, 1969) 1, 3-4 <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0065260108600751>> on dissonance following a decision.

Moderate barriers to undertaking the LLBH at UniSQ were: employment (13.0 per cent, $n = 16$), a lack of awareness of the program, family commitments, and the lack of perceived value for respondents (all 12.2 per cent, $n = 15$). Only 7.3 percent of respondents ($n = 9$) reported a general lack of interest in the program. Very few respondents reported concerns about academic requirements (2.4 per cent, $n = 3$), though the wide confidence interval reflects the uncertainty inherent in small frequencies. The overlapping confidence intervals for several barriers suggest these differences may not be statistically meaningful.



Source: LLBH Survey Data - Respondents who answered 'No' to honours enrollment
Error bars show 95% confidence intervals

A substantial majority of respondents ($n = 38$, 69.1 per cent) selected multiple reasons, suggesting that potential barriers to enrolment are often multiple and compounding.

Among the qualitative comments, financial constraints were a dominant barrier. For example, Respondent 3 reported that a lower cost would make the LLBH more appealing. Respondent 16 simply stated that making the LLBH 'cheaper' would make it more appealing, while another (ID:46) stated that 'Life is expensive now, and I can't afford to delay entering the workforce.'

Additionally, several respondents reported not having the time to undertake further study. For example, Respondent 64 said, 'I'd like to do honours, but I don't have time.' Respondent 78 stated, 'For me it comes down to time commitments. While undertaking my law degree, I worked full-time, this has taken a toll. I may look at further study in the future.' And another (ID:32) said that the LLBH was appealing but they 'worked, cared for two children and became a carer for my father in law who suffered a stroke. I simply didn't have time to study Honours at the time otherwise I would have.'

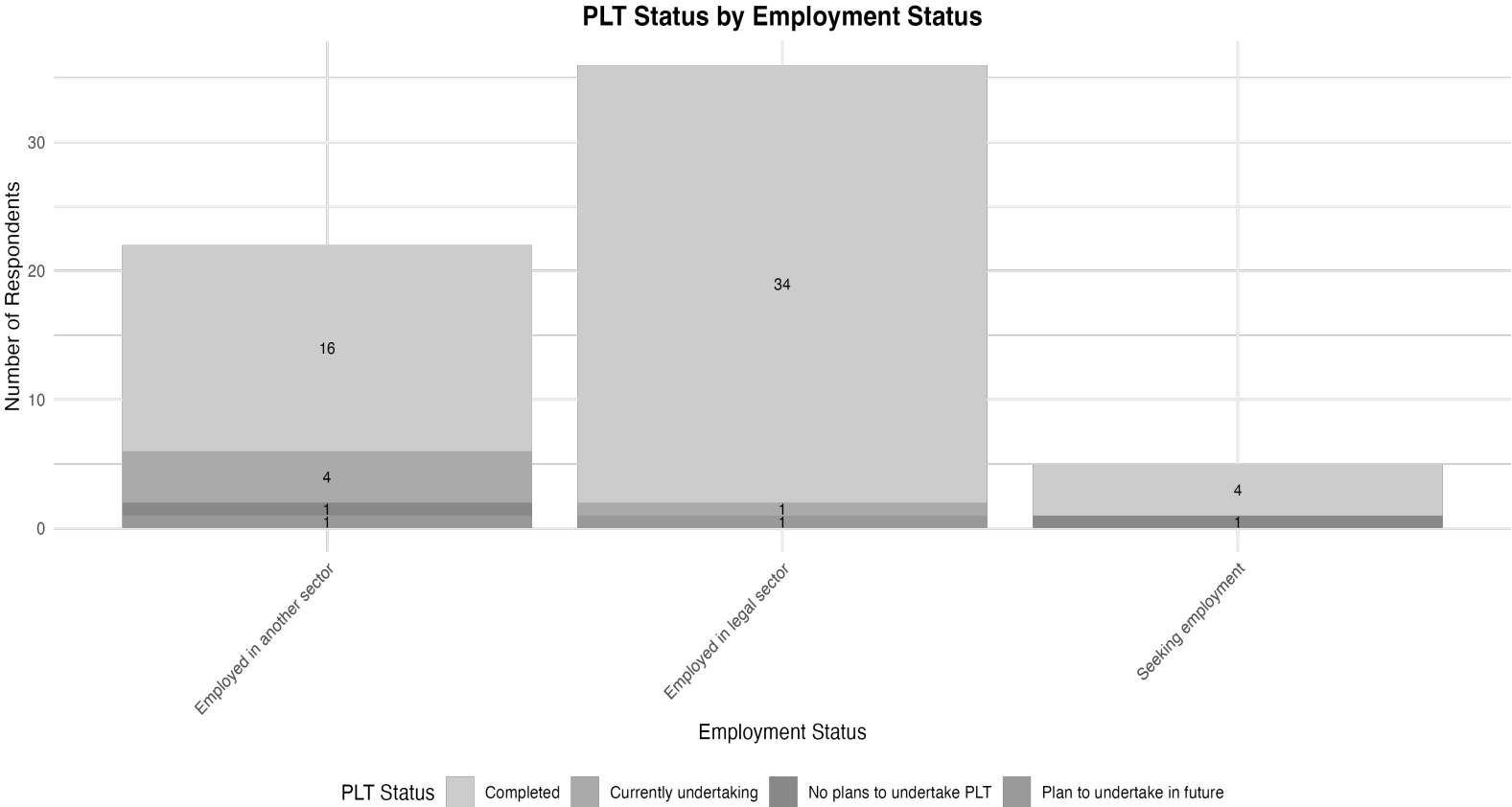
Of those respondents who identified a 'lack of awareness' as a barrier, Respondent 27 reported, 'I wasn't aware it was something offered. More awareness'. Respondent 39 said they were unsure how to make the program more appealing because 'no information about it was shared with me'. Respondent 79 noted, 'I certainly did not know about the Honours program at the time I graduated.'

The major barriers appear to be a combination of financial and time constraints, and the fact many had already gained employment.

C *Practical Legal Training and Honours*

A substantial majority of survey respondents had completed PLT ($n = 56$, 86.2 per cent), with five currently undertaking PLT (7.7 per cent),⁷⁰ two planning to do so (3.1 per cent), and only two had no plans to undertake PLT (3.1 per cent). The majority of PLT graduates are currently employed in the legal sector. The majority of those who are currently undertaking PLT are employed in another sector, and a sizeable number of respondents ($n = 16$) have completed their PLT but are employed in a non-legal sector.

⁷⁰ One respondent did not answer the PLT question and two did not report their employment status. Analyses involving these variables are therefore based on $n = 65$, $n = 64$ or $n = 63$, as applicable.



Of the 11 LLBH students, all 11 students had already completed their PLT. This suggests a desire to get qualified to practise law before considering further study.

To examine the relative importance of factors predicting LLBH enrolment while accounting for multiple variables simultaneously, a logistic regression analysis was conducted. Due to the small sample size ($n = 11$ LLBH students) and complete separation in the data (no student who had not completed PLT had enrolled in the LLBH program), Firth logistic regression was employed.⁷¹ A bivariate Firth logistic regression model ($n = 65$) indicated that PLT completion was associated with increased odds of LLBH enrolment (OR = 4.80, 95% CI: 0.54-635.85, $p = 0.193$). The multivariate model ($n = 63$) showed similar results for PLT completion (OR = 3.93, 95% CI: 0.40-531.20, $p = 0.286$), while legal sector employment showed a modest positive association with LLBH enrolment (OR = 1.37, 95% CI: 0.35-6.23, $p = 0.656$). However, these results must be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size, wide confidence intervals, and high risk of Type II error. The complete separation in the data suggests a substantial practical relationship between PLT completion and Honours, even though statistical significance was not achieved.

D *How to improve the program?*

Some survey respondents suggested clarifying the benefits of the program. Respondent 98 noted the need for ‘a more thorough description about why you might choose to do honours in the first place’. Respondent 91 stated they wanted ‘to be better informed about the opportunity in my last year’. Another participant (ID:8) expressed a lack of understanding, perceiving it merely as ‘another little thing on a resume’.

Many respondents used this question to discuss issues of employability. One respondent (ID:42) stated bluntly, ‘Honours doesn’t provide any greater chance of employment... I also don’t see value in it.’ This sentiment was echoed by others, who wanted to know how ‘it would actually benefit my career’ (IDs: 59, 70). Respondent 112 explained that their decision to drop the program was ‘based around what was most valuable to my career in the future’. One respondent (ID:97) wanted ‘to know the benefits seen by potential employers to see if the financial burden was worth it.’ Some felt the program needed to ‘help secure employment after study and provide real world experience’ (ID:115).

Several respondents also expressed a preference for an embedded Honours or embedded pathway at UniSQ. Respondent 120 ‘would have liked to ... undertake Honours throughout the degree, rather than upon completion.’ Respondent 83 suggested the LLBH would be more attractive ‘if it was incorporated into the existing framework and did

⁷¹ David Firth, ‘Bias Reduction of Maximum Likelihood Estimates’ (1993) 80(1) *Biometrika* 27.

not take additional time.’ Respondent 66 ‘would have been content with doing the extra work if it meant having the honours title on my degree.’

V DISCUSSION

A *Reconceptualising Honours: A Vocational Pathway, Not a Research Apprenticeship*

This study’s most significant contribution is the empirical refutation of the view that law Honours is primarily a pathway to a research career. Although most of the extant literature is not law-specific,⁷² law Honours is still ‘traditionally seen as the main pathway’ into higher degree by research programs and employment in academia.⁷³ This study’s findings suggest otherwise.

The results are best interpreted through the complementary lenses of human capital and expectancy theories. The most important motivation for LLBH enrolment was credit for completing PLT ($\bar{x}$ = 4.45), while postgraduate preparation ranked second lowest ($\bar{x}$ = 3.45). From a human capital theory lens, this suggests that students calculate the returns on their educational investment in terms of professional rather than academic progression. The high valuation of PLT credit aligns with the goal of reducing time and financial investment. This framework also helps explain why financial considerations and opportunity costs emerged as significant barriers to LLBH enrolment, with 15.4 per cent of respondents citing financial reasons and 19.5 per cent citing time constraints as primary barriers, a pattern consistent with the relative salience of opportunity costs over direct tuition costs in the Australian HECS-HELP context discussed above.

Complementing this economic perspective, expectancy theory provides insight into the psychological aspects of these choices. The theory posits that motivation is determined by three factors: expectancy (belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (belief that performance leads to desired outcomes), and valence (the value placed on those outcomes). This framework explains the sentiments of students who questioned the value of the LLBH in helping them achieve their career goals. For example, respondents stated that ‘Honours doesn’t provide any greater chance of employment’ and questioned how ‘it would actually benefit my career’. These views demonstrate low instrumentality, as students do not perceive a clear connection between completing the program and the highly valued outcome of securing employment. According to the theory, when instrumentality is low, motivation to enrol diminishes.

⁷² See Backer and Benckendorff (n 2); Horstmanshof and Boyd (n 5) 14; Zeegers and Barron (n 9) 573.

⁷³ Burton, Laurens and Marychurch (n 5) 33.

B *Implications for law schools and Honours programs*

The lack of uniformity in Honours among Australian law schools may be undermining the degree's value, as predicted by Nick James (2020).⁷⁴ That Honours is no longer a badge of distinction may also be known to LLB graduates.⁷⁵ This may explain why almost 40 per cent of respondents had a low perception of Honours in the job market.⁷⁶ Further research is required to identify why this is so. However, it is clear that the perception of Honours would improve if the value of the qualification to employers was known (and favourable).

Another implication is to question the existence of separate Honours programs entirely. Many respondents expressed a desire to complete Honours but were constrained by existing commitments. An embedded program reduces the friction associated with deciding to undertake an additional year of study. This was key to improving the Honours program at UniSQ for some respondents. Respondent 59 suggested, 'Incorporate in the Bachelor degree so that students don't have to do this on top of their degree when all they want to do is become a lawyer.' Similarly, Respondent 66 stated, 'I think the honours program should be included within the general law degree similar to how it functions at other universities.' Respondent 83 echoed this sentiment, proposing, 'If it was incorporated into the existing framework and did not take additional time (like offered at Bond).' Respondent 92 also highlighted the issue of separate enrolment, noting, 'Once people complete their LLB, it is unlikely that they will return to complete more units for the Honours.' Respondents 112 and 120 made similar observations. Although not specifically asked whether UniSQ should continue to offer a separate law Honours, this topic emerged organically as a theme suggesting a preference for an integrated program, at least among those who were eligible. It should be noted, however, that this preference emerged from respondents at an institution with a separate program; whether students already enrolled in embedded pathway programs hold comparable views is a question that warrants further research.

C *International Context*

While the Australian Honours system is unique, the challenges and motivations potentially reflect broader global trends in legal education. In the UK, the LLB (Hons) is now the standard, integrated qualifying law degree. In North America, 'Honours' are awarded based on GPA rather than a separate program. This avoids the structural ambiguity of Australia's mixed model and sends a clear signal to employers based

⁷⁴ James (n 6).

⁷⁵ On the 'badge of distinction', see *ibid*.

⁷⁶ This question was open to all respondents. 12 respondents ranked the perceived value of Honours in the job market as one, and 13 respondents ranked it as two out of potential five.

purely on academic standing. The apt parallel to Australia's optional, separate Honours year is the one-year Master of Laws (LLM) degree.

Literature on student motivations for pursuing an LLM reveals the same fundamental tension between academic and vocational goals identified in this study,⁷⁷ with similar barriers of high financial cost and the opportunity cost.⁷⁸ Therefore, this study's central finding - that students are increasingly viewing an additional year of advanced legal study through a pragmatic, vocational lens rather than a purely academic one - may not be unique to law Honours in Australia. It may reflect a broader trend in postgraduate legal education. A key point of contrast, however, is UniSQ's unique RPL credit for PLT, which more closely integrates academic and vocational training than is typical in other common law jurisdictions.

D *Recommendations for Practice and Policy*

The following recommendations are directed at different audiences. Some apply specifically to institutions operating separate Honours programs, where students must actively choose to enrol after completing their LLB; others are more broadly applicable. The distinction is noted where relevant. To address student misconceptions and increase enrolment in law Honours programs, law schools should implement a multi-faceted strategy. For all law schools with an Honours program, marketing materials need reframing to shift the narrative from Honours being primarily a pathway to academia. Instead, the focus should be on the development of practical skills relevant to legal practice, such as advanced research, critical analysis, and project management, while also emphasising the personal growth and challenge that students find motivating. For separate and embedded pathway programs in particular, this should be supported by proactive outreach, including direct, personalised communication with all eligible final-year LLB students, potentially followed by individual meetings to discuss the program's benefits. To further clarify the value proposition, law schools should develop evidence-based materials, using alumni testimonials and employment data, that clearly articulate the program's

⁷⁷ University of Essex Online, 'Six Reasons to Study for an LLM' (Web Page, 11 November 2016) <<https://online.essex.ac.uk/blog/six-reasons-study-llm/>> on the dual motivations of employability and as a 'stepping stone to a PhD'; Spark Finance, '2025 Guide to Studying an LLM in the UK: Top Universities, Costs & Financial Aid' (Web Page, 6 February 2025) <<https://sparkfinance.com.au/2025-guide-to-studying-an-llm-in-the-uk-top-universities-costs-financial-aid/>> ('2025 Guide to Studying an LLM in the UK') on 'Career Advancement' versus 'Research-Based LLM' programs.

⁷⁸ Spark Finance, '2025 Guide to Studying an LLM in the US: Top Universities, Costs & Financial Aid' (Web Page, 6 February 2025) <<https://sparkfinance.com.au/2025-guide-to-studying-an-llm-in-the-us-top-universities-costs-financial-aid/>> ('2025 Guide to Studying an LLM in the US') on the high cost of tuition and living expenses in the US as a barrier; AECC Sri Lanka, 'Why Study LLM in Canada?' (Web Page) <<https://www.aeccglobal.lk/blog/llm-in-canada>> detailing significant tuition and living costs for LLM students in Canada.

return on investment and how the skills gained are valued by employers. For separate programs specifically, financial barriers can be mitigated through the creation and promotion of targeted Honours scholarships. For institutions currently operating a separate program, a review of the program structure is recommended, with consideration given to an 'embedded pathway' model that allows students to complete Honours-level work, while offering credit for PLT.

For institutions with separate Honours programs considering a transition to an embedded pathway model, this study's findings suggest several design principles. The program should integrate Honours-level coursework within the standard degree timeframe, avoiding the requirement for an additional year of enrolment,⁷⁹ which this study identifies as the primary structural source of friction. Entry should remain merit-based, with a minimum GPA threshold that preserves the credential's distinguishing value — a feature that separates the embedded pathway model from fully embedded programs that confer Honours on all graduates regardless of research engagement. The program should include a research component sufficient to satisfy AQF Level 8 requirements, such as a supervised thesis or extended research project undertaken as an elective within the standard credit point load. Where an institution currently offers RPL for PLT within a separate program, consideration should be given to retaining this integration in the transition, given that this study found PLT credit to be the single strongest driver of enrolment. Finally, eligible students should be identified and encouraged to elect the Honours pathway during their penultimate year, rather than facing the decision post-graduation when, as Schultz notes, opportunity costs are at their highest.

The findings also have significant implications for higher education policy, particularly concerning the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). A clear disconnect exists between the AQF's definition of a Bachelor Honours Degree (Level 8) and its application within professional disciplines like law. While the descriptor acknowledges preparation for 'professional work,' its primary emphasis and key differentiator from a Level 7 Bachelor Degree is its function as a research pathway, codified through mandatory research components.⁸⁰ This study provides empirical evidence that law graduates pursue Honours for vocational reasons, creating a fundamental tension with the national standard. This gap between a qualification's formal purpose and its practical use, creates ambiguity in its value. Policymakers should consider a review of the AQF level 8 descriptor, potentially introducing a dual-pathway distinction such as 'Research Honours' and 'Advanced Professional Practice Honours'. Furthermore, government funding models, often predicated on building national research capacity, should be realigned to recognise the dual

⁷⁹ See, eg, Macquarie University, 'Bachelor of Law (Honours)', *Graduating with Law Honours from 2023* (Web Page) <<https://www.mq.edu.au/faculty-of-arts/schools/macquarie-law-school/study-with-us/bachelor-of-law-honours>>.

⁸⁰ Australian Qualifications Framework Council, AQF 2nd ed (n 6) 50.

role Honours now plays. Supporting an Honours year that produces highly skilled legal practitioners with advanced analytical abilities required by the AQF Level 8 descriptor is a valuable outcome for the national economy and should be recognised in both policy and funding allocations.

The legal profession also has a role to play in clarifying the value of the Honours program. Legal employers should be encouraged to actively engage with law schools to articulate the specific skills and attributes they value in graduates, helping to bridge the current perception gap among students. Additionally, it is important for employers to be educated on the different Honours models available across institutions. This would enable them to make more informed hiring decisions and ensure that graduates are appropriately recognised for their additional expertise.

E *Limitations and Future Research*

A significant limitation of the present study is the sample size, particularly of LLBH graduates ($n = 11$), which prevented reliable inferential statistical analysis. Also, participants were sourced exclusively from UniSQ, and UniSQ's unique PLT credit arrangements limit generalisability. Common limitations in this type of study also include the cross-sectional design, which captures perceptions at a single point and inhibits tracking changes in motivations or career aspirations over time. Additionally, self-reported data may introduce biases, leading to overestimation of benefits or underreporting of challenges.

The most pressing need for future research is to empirically quantify the employability benefits of a law Honours degree. This would provide objective data for eligible students and could lift the perceived value of the degree. Ideally, this research would track the career progression, salary trajectories, and job satisfaction levels of Honours graduates, comparing them against their non-Honours counterparts. Such an investigation would provide concrete evidence to address the current uncertainty among prospective students of the degree's practical benefits.

Additionally, exploration of employer perceptions of the qualification is also warranted. This research should aim to understand how law firms perceive the qualification, whether they differentiate between various Honours models, and if it improves a graduate's career prospects. Such insights would help law schools better articulate the benefits of Honours, and align with industry expectations, thereby mitigating some of the barriers identified by respondents.

VI CONCLUSION

The central finding of this study is that motivations for undertaking a separate LLB Honours degree are vocational and personal, not academic. The study provides novel evidence demonstrating a direct

link to professional credentialing (PLT) and a clear disinterest in the traditional research pathway. This challenges the foundational assumptions underpinning the historical purpose of Honours and its current framing within national qualifications frameworks.

While Honours graduates showed a higher rate of employment in the legal sector, the overall perception of the degree's value in the job market was moderate to low. The primary barriers were time constraints, financial considerations, and secured employment. A lack of awareness and perceived lack of value were also significant, with many respondents expressing a preference for an embedded Honours structure.

The findings challenge the traditional view of Honours as primarily an academic pathway, suggesting law schools should realign their programs and marketing to reflect students' career-oriented motivations. By understanding and responding to the drivers of students, and by implementing the targeted recommendations outlined, separate Honours programs can mitigate barriers to enrolment, enhance their appeal, and better serve the needs of students and the legal profession.

VII APPENDIX

Note: The 'Embedded' category encompasses programs that confer Honours on all LLB graduates as well as programs that require students to satisfy additional academic requirements and complete research-based electives. These approaches represent meaningfully different models and the single category label does not fully capture this variation. This table was current as of October 2025.

University	LLBH Type
Australian Catholic University	Embedded
Australian National University	Embedded
Bond University	Embedded honours pathway
Central Queensland University	NA
Charles Darwin University	Separate
Charles Sturt University	Separate Hons - not LLBH
Curtin University	Separate
Deakin University	Separate
Edith Cowan University	Separate
Flinders University	Embedded
Griffith University	Embedded
James Cook University	Embedded honours pathway
La Trobe University	Embedded
Macquarie University	Embedded honours pathway
Monash University	Embedded

Murdoch University	Separate
Queensland University of Technology	Embedded
RMIT University	NA
Southern Cross University	Separate
Swinburne University of Technology	NA
University of Adelaide	Embedded
University of Canberra	Embedded honours pathway
University of Melbourne	NA - JD only
University of New England	Embedded honours pathway
University of New South Wales	Embedded honours pathway
University of Newcastle	Embedded
University of Notre Dame	Embedded
University of Queensland	Embedded
University of South Australia	Embedded
University of Southern Queensland	Separate
University of Sydney	Embedded
University of Tasmania	Embedded
University of Technology, Sydney	Embedded
University of Western Australia	NA - JD only

University of Wollongong	Embedded
University of the Sunshine Coast	Embedded
Victoria University, Australia	Embedded
Western Sydney University	Embedded