Chapter 3
Methods and Limitations

3.1 Methodology

The main aim of this book is to present an overview of the available information about educational offers for talented students in higher education in 11 European countries and place it in the relevant local educational and societal context with regard to excellence.

The research team, apart from the author, consisted of a project leader and seven honors students and alumni, who worked on the gathering of data from different countries. They were all instructed about the background of the research and the definitions used.

At the start of this project, the team had little idea what info could be found. Especially in the starting stages, cues and clues to information were found in different ways. The gathering of data was structured, as described below, but readers should keep in mind that this book is based on explorative research.

Scientifically, its main aim is to open up new information and make informed suggestions for further research, delving deeper into different aspects of honors education in order to spread knowledge about the subject among honors educators, students, policy makers and others involved in higher education.

Apart from general and theoretical information already discussed, the information in this book is divided into two types:

1. Information about the (clusters of) countries in this book, their education system and culture and policy towards stimulating excellence; and
2. Information about individual honors programs within higher education institutions.

For each type, we gathered data in various ways. Initial insights were gained through personal contacts and experience, scientific literature searches and targeted web searches. Subsequently, we contacted hundreds of people at higher education institutions or otherwise involved in higher education, to get background information

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on certain aspects of the education system, to check if programs were present and/or to get practical details about specific programs. These professionals were first contacted through e-mail and if necessary later by phone.

In addition, we have undertaken 14 interviews with key informants, who were found through official information sources and/or personal networks. Phone or Skype conversations ranging in length from 30 to 90 min were recorded and transcribed. This forms the basis of the interview texts that are being used throughout the book. Sometimes information first gathered in an interview was supplemented by information from reports or e-mails. The data gathered through such interviews are referred to as 'personal communication' in the notes. If a longer interview is available, it is referred to in the notes. A list of interviewees and interview summaries can be found in Appendix 4.[1]

Seven honors students and alumni from different HEIs have helped to gather information, and have written preliminary versions of chapters of this book. Twenty local experts from all 11 countries have helped to check for correctness and completeness of information. All contributors are mentioned in the acknowledgements section.

3.2 Education Systems

To facilitate comparison across education systems, we mostly used openly available and well-known information sources, offering a comparative perspective. To study the education systems in the countries in this book, the Eurypedia encyclopedia from the Eurydice Network of the European Commission was an important first source (Eurydice 2014). Also, the Country Reports of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) were used, as well as the OECD's PISA reports about 15-year-olds' educational achievements and the country reports supplied to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Information about government policies was found on government websites and in scientific literature and has also been topic of discussion in interviews with key informants.

Our description of the national education systems in the country chapters is based on different sources. European countries have set up a common encyclopedia in which they describe their whole education system: Eurypedia.[2] The structure of the national education system is shown in a standardized diagram. We use these diagrams in the individual country chapters to provide a general picture of the complicatedness of the national education system.

[1] In addition, information that could not be found in available sources and that was received by e-mail from specific contact persons at HEIs, is also referred to as 'personal communication'.

[2] The Eurypedia encyclopedia is updated constantly. For this book, data were gathered in the period November 2013–April 2014, and references to Eurypedia were checked once more in May 2014. Later changes have not been included.

Attached to these diagrams is an extensive standardized legend and explanation. Below, the diagram for Norway is shown as an example (Fig. 3.1a). At the top of the diagram, ages of pupils are shown and the red bar shows the extent of compulsory education. The colors refer to different ISCED levels. ISCED is an international system used to classify types of education, developed by UNESCO.[3] The blocks show the types of schools available and their local names. In the Norwegian example, there is a single-structure education up to the age of 16, after which there are two types. The tertiary education structure (in green) is shown to the right and is not attached to age.

Fig. 3.1b shows the standardized legend for all Eurypedia diagrams. In the individual country chapters, the standardized legend will not be shown again, as it can be looked up here.

3.3 Programs per Higher Education Institution

In order to learn more about individual programs per HEI, we have used the websites of research universities and universities of applied sciences using local terms for honors education. Our first focus was on research universities, as our experience from the Netherlands is that honors programs are first developed at these HEIs. We have studied the research universities in all countries. Depending on the local relationship between different kinds of institutions in the higher education system and our findings at the research universities, we extended our search to universities of applied sciences or university colleges in a number of countries.[4]

Generally speaking, we extended our search to specialized university colleges or universities of applied sciences that do not have an exclusive regional focus. However, specific local situations sometimes necessitated other choices. In practice, this means that:

- in the Netherlands we included all research universities and all government-funded universities of applied sciences (*hogescholen*);
- in Belgium we included all research universities, but excluded the university colleges (*hogescholen*) and colleges (*Hautes Ecoles*) and art colleges;
- in Luxembourg we included the only university;
- in Denmark we approached the universities and university colleges (*professionshøjskole*), but excluded vocational short-cycle higher education (*erhvervsakademi*);

[3] More information can be found at www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-standard-classification-of-education.aspx

[4] In some countries, the difference between a research university and other more vocationally oriented institutes of higher education is very small (for example Iceland), while in others differences are huge (for example the German-speaking countries). This difference can be expressed in legal definitions, but it is also part of local academic tradition.

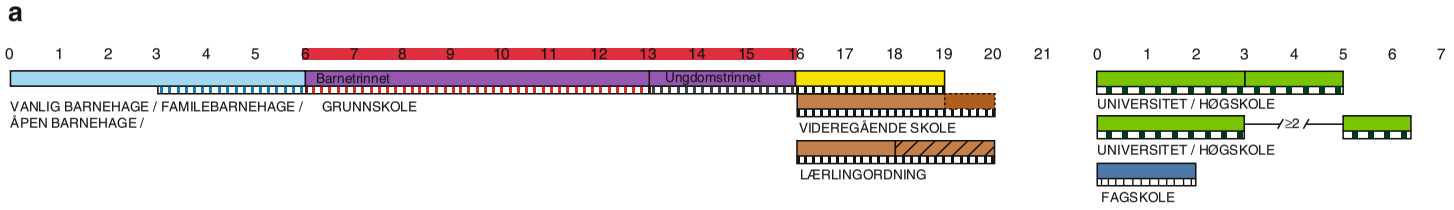

Fig. 3.1 (**a**) The Norwegian education system (Eurydice 2014)

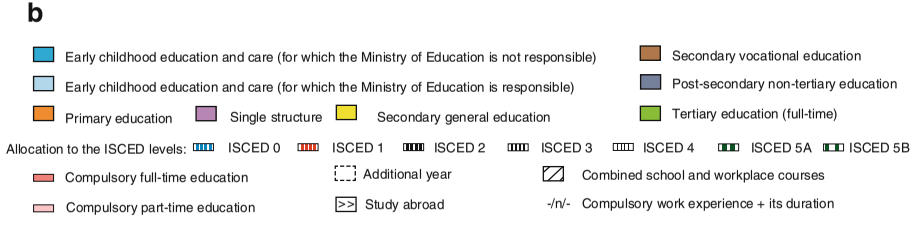

Fig. 3.1 (**b**) Standardized Eurypedia legend (Eurydice 2014)

- in Norway we included the research universities and specialized university colleges, but excluded the 'regular' regional university colleges;
- in Sweden we approached the universities and the state university colleges (*högskolor*);
- in Finland we approached the universities, but excluded the polytechnics (*ammattikorkeakoulu* or *AMK*);
- in Iceland we approached all HEIs (Icelandic law does not differentiate between universities and other HEIs);
- in Germany we approached all universities, but excluded the universities of applied sciences and/or arts (*Fachhochschulen*);
- in Austria we included all universities, but excluded the universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*);
- in Switzerland, we included all tier-one universities and recognized universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*), but excluded the (unrecognized) private universities.

The specific choices are explained in the respective country chapters.

In total, information was sought about special provisions for talented students at 303 higher education institutions, 251 of which are outside of the Netherlands. We asked the HEIs if they had any special provisions for talented students and gave them our working definition of an honors program, adding that in the Netherlands these programs are usually called honors programs, but different terms are in use in other countries.

We first approached the HEIs by e-mail, using published e-mail addresses of either international offices or communication/press offices where available, or general e-mail addresses if no appropriate other address could be found. If necessary, reminder e-mails were sent and HEIs were contacted by phone.

The response rate was very high. All institutions from the Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland), and the Benelux countries of Belgium and Luxembourg responded. In Germany, all but three of the 110 universities provided information. For Austria and Switzerland different existing information sources were used, explained in the respective country chapters. In the Netherlands, out of the 52 HEIs studied, only one university of applied sciences did not provide an answer.

In addition, all key informants in 14 longer interviews were asked about their knowledge of existing programs. In e-mail or phone conversations with other contact persons at HEIs, we also asked about their knowledge of programs. Furthermore, names of key researchers in gifted education with a focus on higher education were entered in Google Scholar, in order to find scientific publications about such programs.

Once a program was found, we gathered as much information as possible, keeping in mind the checklist by Van Eijl et al. (2007), which was discussed in Chap. 2. However, in the timeframe of this research project it was not possible to gather information about all categories on the checklist. We decided to focus on structure, size, content, admission, target group and reward of the program; as well as

practical data such as websites, names of coordinators and contact details. We also tried to establish a starting date.

We did not find information on all of these aspects for all programs, especially for the ones that were established relatively recently. However, the checklist proved useful to structure the information collection process.

We also encountered some difficulties in establishing the number of participants in honors programs. Sometimes this information was not available at all, sometimes there were only numbers about participants entering in a certain year and sometimes we had a total number of participants. In other cases, programs are just starting up, or the number of participants varies widely per year. We have indicated this in the tables with program descriptions throughout the country chapters.

We hope more in-depth research on all aspects of various honors programs in Europe will be conducted, in order to define success and fail factors of honors education.

We decided to make descriptions of programs outside the Netherlands comparable by putting the main characteristics in a standardized table. For the Dutch programs this was not possible, as there are too many to include individually. Therefore we decided to make a limited description of the Dutch honors education on offer per HEI. In addition, we give one example of a specific program per HEI. For all 11 European countries included in this research project we made lists of links to program websites and contact persons per honors program, which can be found in Appendix 3.

3.4 Including and Excluding Programs

Throughout the period of data gathering, choices had to be made what to include and exclude in the book. This proved especially difficult with regard to individual programs. Although we had a working definition of an honors program, it was not always clear whether certain programs that were found could actually be called honors education. This is a challenge also encountered by other researchers trying to identify talent support programs (Györi and Nagy 2011, p. 234–235; see also Van Eijl et al. 2005; Wolfensberger et al. 2012b). Some examples leading to discussion between researchers involved in this project were:

- A private education institution that runs a highly selective program and is well respected in its field, but does not issue officially recognized diplomas as HEIs in the public system do. We excluded this program on the basis that it is not officially part of the higher education system;
- Twin bachelor programs. By taking some extra subjects, students can obtain two diplomas in fields of studies that are somewhat similar, for example mathematics and physics. While special educational provisions might have been made to facilitate this, we still excluded this because it is not a program with its own goals, and students are awarded two diplomas for their efforts;

- International double degree programs. A number of universities, especially in international business and economics, offer double degree programs where students can take courses at two universities and receive two diplomas. Most of these are organized within networks of specialized business schools or universities.[5] These programs are not discussed in the individual country chapters, as they issue double regular diplomas and not a special honors diploma.
- We also found the international CEMS-MIM program,[6] which offers an extra international master diploma to students in business-oriented study programs. This program is excluded from the main text because it is not organized by an individual higher education institution. However, it does offer extra opportunities for talented students and we will therefore briefly discuss it in boxed text 3.1.

Box 3.1: The CEMS-MIM Program

Many extra motivated and talented students spend part of their studies abroad. For example, they might apply for highly competitive scholarships to prestigious universities in the USA or in the UK. However, their home university might also organize or take part in an international program targeting talented students. This is the case at a number of HEIs throughout the countries in this book, mostly in the field of economics or international business.

The best-known of these programs is CEMS-MIM. This is a 1-year postgraduate, pre-experience degree program in International Management. It is open to a select group of students enrolled in a master's programme at one of the 29 universities in the CEMS Alliance. The program includes at least one semester abroad at one of the other CEMS institutes. Students who complete the program successfully will receive a special CEMS-MIM diploma, apart from the regular master's degree at their home institution.

3.5 Limitations

The methods described above imply a wide search for information. However, they also have their limitations. Two important limitations we encountered were language barriers and terminology trouble. Apart from that, the Dutch background of the research team and the fact that we did not perform fieldwork are also relevant factors in the data gathering process.

[5] For example, NHH (Norwegian School of Economics) cooperates with six partner universities in countries varying from Belgium to Mexico. Participating students are selected on the basis of grades, English proficiency and motivation, which is assessed in an interview. Successful applicants follow a 2-year program at NHH and the partner institute, which leads to two degrees: one at NHH and one at the partner institute.

[6] More information at www.cems.org/mim

First of all, a lot of information was available only in local languages.[7] This applied to both policy information from government websites and information about individual programs. While most HEIs have an extensive website in English, information about honors programs was often only available on the local-language homepage.[8]

Second, the terminology used in the various countries differs. The variety was even greater than expected and the political and social impact of terminology use was underestimated. There is also no terminology agreement among scientists. The most commonly used terms refer to the concepts 'gifted' and 'talent', but they are defined in various ways (Mattsson 2013, see also Eurydice 2006). Excellence is also used, although some label this as a non-academic term (Persson 2014).

Similar terminology trouble is associated with the terms 'college', 'university college' and 'honors college'. In the American honors tradition, an honors college is usually a residential college with its own dean. Here, a full undergraduate study program is offered, often amounting to a work load of 4 years of full-time study. In the Netherlands, there are a number of residential honors colleges similar to this American model (although they usually offer 3-year programs), but also a number of other extracurricular or co-curricular programs that use the term 'honors college'. To complicate matters more, the term 'university college' has very different meanings in different countries. For example, University College Utrecht is a residential honors college in the Netherlands. But in for example Norway and Denmark, university colleges are not honors colleges at all, but a generally used name for institutions that would be called universities of applied sciences in most other countries.[9]

Finally, most of the information has been gathered by desktop research from the Netherlands and not by travelling to the countries; this had advantages and disadvantages (see Fuszek 2011, p. 14[10]). While a short period of immersion in the local culture will certainly generate a lot of valuable data, retaining an outside view is also useful, as making comparisons might be easier.

[7] The knowledge of the local languages among the researchers involved in this study limited searches: this knowledge differed from good (Dutch), average (German, French) to limited (Norwegian, Danish, Swedish) to non-existent (Finnish, Icelandic, Italian in Switzerland).

[8] This can be explained by the fact that the main target group of the English-language website is formed by international students. They often do not fall in the target group of the honors program, if this is conducted in the local language.

[9] If we use the terms honors college or university college, it always refers to the meaning in the local context. In the country chapters we will explain the local use of terminology.

[10] The 2011 Hungarian report on talent support in different countries was compiled by making country visits and the researchers found this valuable: 'Every member of our team spent on average one week in the target country to visit and study in detail the sites implementing the presented good practice, and to meet also the individuals elaborating, developing, and implementing them. Our researchers were received by politicians responsible for talent support and by prominent theoretical and practical experts in each country'.

Of course, efforts have been made to make sure the information is as accurate and complete as possible, for example by asking key persons in the countries described to read preliminary versions of the chapters about their respective countries. However, it is possible that information has been missed. This can also be the case because we contacted only one e-mail address per HEI. While we tried to use relevant addresses, it is possible that the person answering our e-mail did not know about a program at his/her HEI.

Also, developments in this field can be rather quick and sudden. Therefore this book should be seen as a snapshot of the situation at the time of writing. Of course, we hope our results inspire other researchers to find out even more about honors education.

We do some suggestions for further research in part V of this book. This concluding part is written in three chapters: the first offering a comparative perspective across the countries, the second offering an analysis of the relevance of the factors described in Chap. 2; and the final chapter providing different perspectives, a look into the future and suggestions for further research.

We start our description of country results with the Benelux countries.

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[11] ***Note:*** *Literature used to prepare this book is included on this list. Some of the entries are in local languages and have not been read completely by the researchers. Instead, they have been searched with keywords to retrieve relevant information.*

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