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Note

Honors as a lab for education development and international cooperation - The case of EUfactcheck.eu

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1. Introduction: origins of the project

2015 saw professionals in the field of journalism grappling with a media landscape that presented significant and fast-paced challenges, for better and worse. Digitalisation had created free and open access to online media, new audiences, storytelling possibilities, better options to gain and trace information, but also an unregulated internet with little privacy protection and a dark (hidden) online reality; all steered by technological developments ([Digital News Report, Reuters 2015](#)). Journalism educators struggled to adapt their curricula in time: change was the new normal ([Lynch, 2015](#)). It was however evident from, for example, the unprecedented growth of [fake news](#) that teaching advanced verification and fact-checking would be essential for the professional future of young journalists.

United in the European Journalism Training Association ([EJTA](#)), a group of lecturers from ten different journalism schools across Europe joined hands to initiate an education-innovation project in fact-checking. Through a collaborative effort with students and experts, these journalism lecturers developed a step-by-step workflow and educational materials for teaching (and practicing) fact-checking. The first test case was the 2019 European Parliamentary elections. In the months leading up to the elections, students from all over Europe used this methodology to fact-check political statements. The method, materials and fact-checks were shared on a publication platform -[EUfactcheck.eu](#)- and promoted via social media.

In the years following, the methodology was distributed through the website EUfactcheck.eu, conference presentations, workshops and various guest lectures. Many journalism schools incorporated the EUfactcheck methodology in their regular education, on both the bachelor's and master's levels.

At the School of Journalism, HU University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht, this fact-checking project started as an honors initiative and was later, organically, incorporated into the regular curriculum.

2. Innovating education with an honors mindset

The European project took off in 2016 when early adapters (like Finnish platform [Faktabaari](#)) and experts such as [Claire Wardle](#) (Cornell University, USA) offered inspiration for a hands-on approach to explore fact-checking and co-develop teaching methods. During an initial meeting of participating schools in the EJTA network, it was decided that each would launch a small fact-checking project or course involving their students. Some were aimed at understanding and defining fact-checking through academic research while others tried new options of verification. Some schools were concerned about digital safety and dependency on tech companies and others developed teaching methods and materials. Every half year the participating schools would meet again at an EJTA event to share experiences, decide on best practices and methods, and discuss challenges and ethical issues (Figure 1).

After each of these pre-conference sessions, the project moved forward swiftly. Individual lecturers took on tasks like preparing a list of useful tools and starting the development of a fact-checking flowchart. Schools adapted ideas from other schools and took them back to their own students and classes to test. In this way the framework of EUfactcheck was constructed together, through a design thinking process.

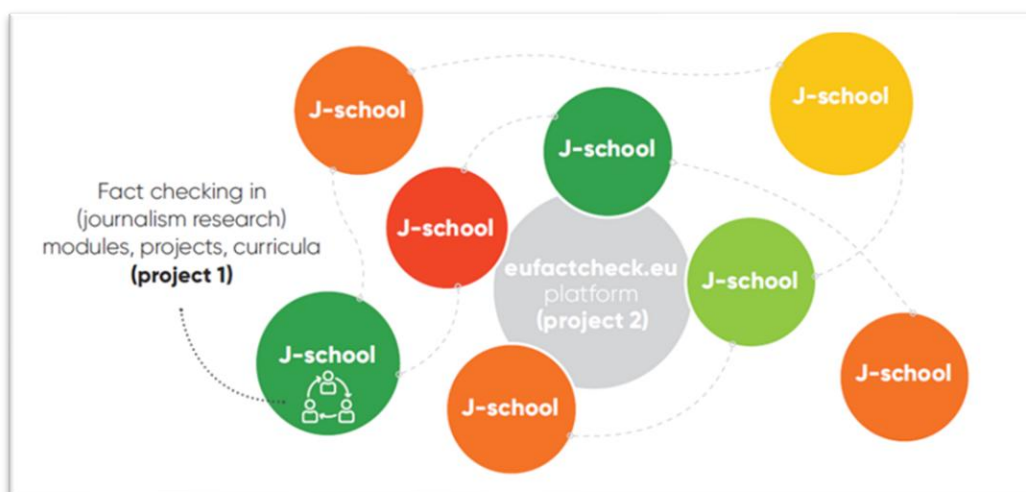


Figure 1: EUfactcheck organic project structure (EJTA, 2020)

At HU University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht, the journalism lecturers and authors of this article decided to start an honors project to co-develop fact-checking methodologies and education in collaboration with their students. The Dutch parliamentary elections in March 2017 offered excellent political statements to start this fact-checking honors project. All students were welcome to join since the [HU approach to honors education](#) is to motivate all students with ambition to challenge and develop themselves personally and professionally. After a short recruitment period, a large group of mainly first- and second-year journalism students signed up to start in 2016.

The group was excited to start this adventure. They embraced the freedom to design their own project and learning environment and they decided on a project name, designed a website to publish their fact-checks and set up social media accounts to promote their publications and generate viewers for their website. The name WFact (Figure 4) caused a bit of a stir but was soon picked up by other media outlets.

As honors lecturers, we took on the roles of facilitators/coaches and gave the students plenty of room to experiment within the genre and do their own research (Wolfensberger, 2012). During weekly editorial meetings, we discussed research findings, interesting claims, and the relevance and trustworthiness of sources. Before each fact-check was published on the WFact website, both lecturers did a double-check of it. In the next year some students signed up for a second time and took on the roles of editors and coaches, developing other honors competencies while they kept on co-developing the methodology with us and sharing their insights for better teaching. We developed teaching materials and formats, tested them in the next group, and collected all experiences and insights for the pan-European EUfactcheck project. In this way we followed a methodology of design thinking for education development as illustrated in Figure 2 (Kelly, 2016).

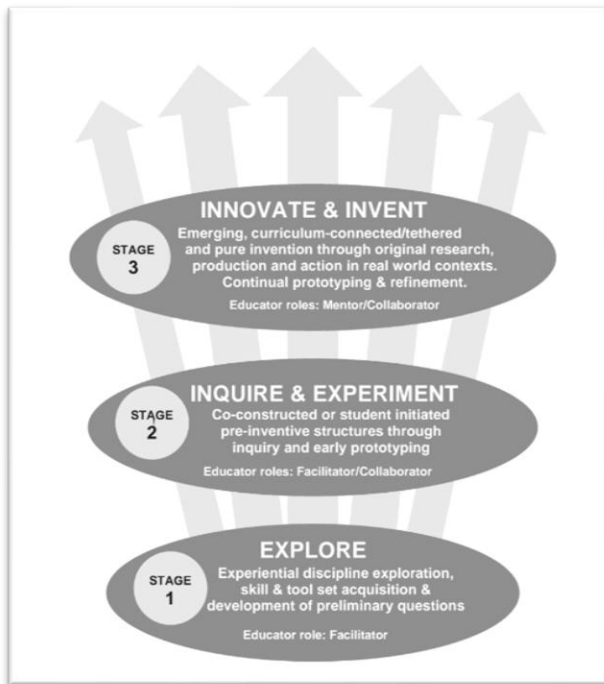


Figure 2: Learning experience design progression for creative development (Kelly, 2016)

In 2017, after a year of WFact experiences, some of the students joined us at the half yearly EJTA meeting so they could share their tips and tricks in person and help everyone further design the EUfactcheck initiative. We were also invited to speak at the World Democratic Forum ([Strasbourg, 2017](#)) where another two students gave their perspectives on fact-checking education. In the years that followed, new groups of WFact honors students have worked with [national media](#) (Live video: Nieuws of Nonsense, NOS, 2018) and [local media](#) to fact-check provincial and [local elections](#).



Figure 3: EUfactcheck logo and truth-labels

3. The launch of the EUfactcheck platform

In February 2019 all participating journalism schools gathered at our university in Utrecht for a fact-checking bootcamp where we finalised the EUfactcheck methodology and teaching materials. The EUfactcheck website was officially launched (Figure 3) and an editorial team consisting of journalism lecturers was put in place to support the J-schools with the publication of their students' fact-checks during the EU Parliamentary Elections, in line with the editorial and design guides. In the months leading up to the elections, the schools tested the methodology ([flowchart](#)), the formats for publication, the social media strategy, and the publication options. The editorial team monitored and collected all experiences and evaluated with the J-schools afterwards. Improvements were implemented and half a year later, [the manual](#) EUfactcheck: a pan-European project (Vissers, N. et al., 2020) was issued, available on the website as open-source material.

In this manual the purpose of EUfactcheck and its objectives are clearly stated:

“...EJTA, intends to build a sustainable curriculum unit on fact-checking in a European network of journalism schools, with a first empirical test phase and production period in the months before the European elections (January - May 2019) and with a common project report and didactic guidelines for dealing with misinformation as a tangible output.” (Vissers, N. et al., 2020, p. 8)

The objectives are: “...to support quality journalism and journalism education, to enhance media literacy within future journalists and their public, to train journalism students in the latest fact-checking techniques and tools and to scrutinise the accuracy of European political statements and their presentation in the media in order to enhance a more fact-based public debate.” (Vissers, N. et al., 2020, p. 10)

In the following years the project continued to move forward and grow. The participants continued to follow the same process of creative educational development which aims to be on top of trends in the professional media field. More journalism schools from the EJTA network implemented the methodology in their regular educational tracks and used the website for student publications, while journalism teachers continued to meet and discuss fact-checking with their colleagues at EJTA events, most recently on the topic of Artificial Intelligence.

In 2024, a new Erasmus+ funded project brought together 45 students and teachers from eight European journalism schools to Utrecht for [an intensive fact-checking week](#), timed to coincide with the EU Parliamentary Elections.

4. From honors projects to regular education

With the WTFact honors projects in Utrecht concurrently running successfully, the need to train **all** students in fact-checking soon became apparent. Since fact-checking or maybe rather the 'verification of information' is an integral part of journalism research, the second-year practical course 'Context and Fact-checking' (Duiden & Fact-checken, 5 ECTS) became a reality in September 2017. In eight workshops of two hours each, the students were taught about verification methods (including image verification), tools like Google Advanced Search and the Wayback Machine, as well as provided with a broader sense of what information and facts actually are within a certain context. This has helped students in identifying trustworthy sources like thinktanks, experts and databases. The students produced two factchecks each during class.



Figure 4: WTFact website logo

The exam at the end of the course was a time-based fact-checking exercise in which students had to check claims and find reliable sources within an hour. There was no time to do in-depth research and write an actual fact-check during the exam.

The coordinator of the 'Context & Fact-checking' second year course was also involved in the honors project and EJTA meetings so any new developments were quickly implemented in the lectures. This made the lectures very relevant with the latest methods, including the before mentioned fact-checking flowchart.

For the students who wanted to do in-depth research and publish a fact-check, the honors project was an excellent opportunity. There was time to experiment without feeling the stress of an exam at the end and there was personal coaching available. Their checks were published on the [WTFact website](#) up to 2021.

From 2021 onwards, a number of Dutch news outlets stopped publishing fact-checks as a separate genre since fact-checking became a standard part of the journalists' toolbox. In the meantime, with new honors projects around Dutch elections, it was decided to not just fact-check but make these projects also about the broader process of fair elections like 'Dynamics in Politics' (['Dynamiek in de Politiek'](#), SvJ Live) and 'In the Mood to Vote' ([In de Stemming](#), SvJ Live). In both projects the aim was also to hold people in power accountable, one of the cornerstones of journalism. In the meantime, students who wanted to write in English about broader European topics were coached to publish on the EUfactcheck site.

Since 2022 the course 'Context & Fact-checking' was incorporated into a larger course in the second year. Nowadays students get two lectures of three hours each in fact-checking, covering the most important definitions and some tools like Google Lens. Students write two fact-checks during the semester and publish these on the general classroom website, each student receives feedback while researching and again afterwards. They are marked on a number of learning outcomes that include quality, relevance and trustworthiness of sources and their research skills.

Furthermore, we now participate in Blended Intensive Programmes (Erasmus+) in cross-collaboration with other EJTA Journalism schools. This has given the honors project an extra dimension since students now work in international teams in which different perspectives of Europe make for more inclusive fact-checks. This also aligns with the ambitions of international collaborative journalism in our European network.

5. Lessons learned

Looking back at this whole ten-year trajectory, it really is the ideal example of implementing an innovative honors project in an existing journalism curriculum. It did take a number of lecturers extra time outside of business hours to get it all done but the rewards were significant and we loved it. To work with enthusiastic students to co-create educational practices, to be at the forefront of the latest developments in our field of media, with all sorts of media outlets interested in what we do made it all worthwhile.

The whole process in the end was a very organic one, reshaping itself according to what was necessary and possible at the time. While integrating new tools and perspectives on fact-checking presented challenges, the flexibility inherent in the honors format allowed for experimentation and innovation. This flexibility also made it possible to keep at pace with a fast-changing media landscape and to continuously take insights back to the existing curriculum, to keep it up to date and relevant.

Co-developing education with students and checking-in with their needs and views encouraged us to make choices to enrich regular education. It took some perseverance to get it right, at first accepting feasible, but not desirable teaching methods such as written exams. But the proven success of the fact-checking methodology gave us the wings to include the production of fact-checks in our second-year programme.

By viewing the honors projects as 'labs', where failure is an option, we created a breeding ground for different approaches in teaching and space for more experimental methods. For students it was an environment where they could develop confidence and build resilience, daring to experiment, and voicing their own ideas, and taking responsibility for their own learning environment. In that way, this honors project also has informed pedagogies of personalized learning, putting a 'student in the lead' as our university's education vision encourages us to do in [Together for the Future](#). The question however is: how can a regular, more restrictive learning environment, offer the same opportunities for education innovation as we experienced in our honors project?

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