Case Study Extracted From:

When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

Edited by:

Beverley Gibbs[1], Kay Bond[2], Georgina Harris[3], Emma Lewis[4], Amanda Pate[4], Jon Renyard[5], Natalie Wint[6] & Gary C Wood[4]

May 2024

[1] Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology
[2] TEDI-London
[3] Arden University
[4] New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering
[5] University of the Arts Bournemouth
[6] University College London

A Quality Enhancement Project funded by the Quality Assurance Agency

When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

Case Study of Practice

Making Curriculum Development a Sprint not a Marathon

Leanne du Main & Zoë Allman[8]

1. Context

In 2021, De Montfort University (DMU) embarked on a radical education transformation project to redesign and validate all programmes to block design. The change was at pace requiring over 75 undergraduate programmes to be approved for delivery in less than three months. We achieved this by using Design Sprint Methodology, developed by Google to identify solutions to complex problems. There are six phases: understand, define, sketch, decide, prototype and validate. It is fast paced, hence named 'sprint', allowing teams to hyper focus and achieve results quickly. Design Sprints had previously been used on a smaller scale at Coventry University. At DMU we modified Design Sprints to be shorter and more scalable for use across the whole university. In 2022, we completed the transformation by taking our postgraduate programmes through the same process.

2. The innovation

Traditionally, university approval and validation processes can be lengthy and laden with forms, documents, committees and other such bureaucracy. This is not without cause: developing degree programmes needs to demonstrate integrity, validity and academic rigour. Most programmes are designed to align with QAA benchmark statements, professional and regulatory bodies, external stakeholders and students. It is not unheard of for there to be a duration of 18+ months to take a programme from initial idea to final approval.

Following the launch of our new Education 2030 strategy, DMU embarked on a journey to transform its curriculum to block learning. This approach sees students study one module at a time over a 7-week period. More information on block learning across the sector can be found on this QAA funded website. Aiming to enhance the student experience, this immersive delivery approach has potential to increase student attainment, continuation and academic outcomes.

[8] De Montfort University

A Quality Enhancement Project funded by the Quality Assurance Agency

Our aim was to make the transition to block as efficient and effective as possible. Starting in November 2021, with an aim to start the new programmes in September 2023, we needed to complete validations in less than three months to ensure time to launch the new portfolio. Our Design Sprints took place over three days for each programme. An overview of the Design Sprint is in Table 1.

Day	Session Content and Outcomes	Attendees
Day One	What will a graduate of this programme be able to do? SWOT analysis, programme vision, learning outcomes and overall structure.	Programme Leader and subject teams. Quality representative. Students (if possible).
Day Two	Develop modules, learning outcomes and programme assessment strategy. Identify resources needed.	Programme Leader and subject teams. Quality representative. Students (if possible).
Day Three	Sensemaking, testing with stakeholders and students. Final steps and completion of essential documents.	Programme Leader and subject teams. Quality representative. External Examiners. External stakeholders, students, alumni, library, careers, wellbeing, sustainability etc.

Table 1: Design Sprint Overview

As a university-wide curriculum transformation project, this activity provided an opportunity to critically review curriculum content and resources across the institution. An initial scan of academic programmes to include in the transformation identified a small number that would be entirely exempt (there were additional, external factors influencing curriculum design and delivery that could not be achieved in this approach).

In advance of the Design Sprints, we worked closely with our Department of Academic Quality to scrutinise our current approach to validations. As a result of this scrutiny, we removed and streamlined several stages of the process. For example, a prior requirement was a comprehensive programme handbook, this duplicated much of the information provided in other forms and was therefore removed. Additionally, the requirement for an in-depth market review was removed for programmes with a significant track record of success, as was the need to make a case for validation given this was an institution-wide initiative. We consolidated many steps into few, challenging some of these existing processes, seeking to maximise efficiencies through seeking shared information only once and providing signposting and combining validation events so that many cognate programmes could be considered together.

In the early stages of communicating our Design Sprint approach, some teams were hesitant to adopt the methodology. In many cases this was due to concerns over taking three full days out of their normal schedule. Some were also concerned that 'rushing' the development may result in a lower quality outcome. Additional listening sessions and training were provided, which resulted in greater adoption. It was our ability to constructively challenge longstanding QA processes, adopt a solution-focused approach, and work collaboratively across and beyond the institution, that led to the development of a success QA process for use in our transformation.

3. Outcomes

Prior to adopting Design Sprints, DMU typically worked to an eighteen-month time period from approval of the proposal to validate (or re-validate a programme) to the end of the academic quality process event (confirmation of completion of any actions arising from the validation), and this usually occurred at least three months in advance of the start of delivery. These timescales were not appropriate within this transformation, but the need to continue to focus on, and maintain, quality were.

The transformation was swift yet effective. In a three-month period between November 2021 and February 2022, the university validated 76 undergraduate programmes to align with our block design. All commenced delivery from the start of the 2022-23 academic year. Postgraduate programmes followed a

year later, now over 80% of our programmes have completed the transformation process with most of the remaining programme due to change in September 2024.

To facilitate the volume of validation events at pace, these were held virtually, enabling us to engage stakeholders in consultation and decision-making. The students' union contributed as student panel members, and support and operations between the university and students' union subsequently improved. Academic reviewers, external advisers and industry experts recognised the value of stakeholder collaboration in curriculum development. Core topics including digital literacy, sustainability, decolonisation, academic scholarship and employability were embedded within the curriculum through the active engagement of relevant stakeholders during Design Sprints.

Across all validation approval events, the university saw more commendations and fewer conditions than under the traditional process, and several areas of good practice emerged:

- Curriculum design (including alignment with the university's strategy and vision).
- Student support initiatives aligned to the curriculum and delivery.
- Employability embedded in the curriculum, informed by industry engagement.
- Focusing QA on the outcome rather than the process facilitated agility and efficiency in the programme approval process. The Design Sprint methodology permitted greater flexibility, challenging the previous time-consuming processes without reducing the quality of curriculum design.

Recognising our ability to operate using agile approaches, at pace, we were keen to maintain this approach going forward. We have introduced a more flexible curriculum modification process, allowing for the lessons from early experiences of block delivery to inform curriculum reshaping as required. Whilst this has been used infrequently, it provides a rigorous, yet dynamic approach to adapt curriculum sequencing (block delivery order) and assessment to continue to improve the student experience.

At De Montfort University, the former traditional process is no more: the Design Sprint is here to stay.

4. Takeaways

- Utilising the principles of design leadership and thinking from creative industries is an excellent catalyst for approaching curriculum design in an innovative way.
- Developing programmes with a focused yet fast-paced methodology does not reduce the quality of the curriculum.
- Some of the barriers encountered were 'imagined'. On further investigation and questioning, what was thought to be impossible became possible.
- Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) are keen to adopt new curriculum design practices and rarely create barriers.
- Build in flexible modes of curriculum modification post-validation. This supports innovation through greater confidence to take risks and try something new.
- Sprint Design Methodology promotes a stronger team-based approach to curriculum development and enhanced stakeholder engagement.
- Collaborating on ideas with Academic Quality teams from the outset rather than just at the end of the design process produces better outcomes at validation.
- Developing leaner processes for curriculum approval and modification ensures changes are made to reflect the emerging needs of industry and society, while also encouraging educators to adopt a more innovative and reflexive approach to programme design.

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete." (Buckminster Fuller)