



NEW MODEL INSTITUTE FOR  
TECHNOLOGY & ENGINEERING



# When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

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## 1. Introduction

This report presents findings of a QAA collaborative enhancement project undertaken in order to investigate the relationship between quality assurance (QA) and innovation in UK Higher Education (HE). The work was motivated by experiences of the project team working across a range of institutions of different sizes, ages and foci, and our observations of the way in which changes during the pandemic enabled more frictionless innovation and change.

After briefly setting out the current context, the report sets out the project methodology and shares findings from two studies: a survey of UK HE professionals, and focus groups to further explore and discuss findings. The conclusion of the report provides a series of provocations and recommendations with the aim of enhancing institutions' ability to support quality-led innovative practice. These are complemented by six case studies of practice.

## 2. Context

The idea that UK universities need disruptive innovation can be tracked in HE policy throughout the last fifteen years. From the Browne Review (BIS 2010), through the Green Paper *Fulfilling Our Potential* (2015), the White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (BIS 2016), and ultimately to the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), the proposition that competition and supply-side reform will bring much needed innovation to reluctant universities is embodied in the policy agenda. The marketised HE sector that this legislation aimed to bring into being was imagined as stimulating structural innovations that would lead to fundamentally different value propositions for students. These innovations were

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expected to be manifested in a diversity of institutions including size; specialism and location of provider; mode and pace of study; and curriculum emphasis, particularly in relation to vocational goals. Since the inception of the Office for Students (OfS), 101 organisations have been added to the OfS Register of HE providers, increasing the provider base by approximately 30%.

Nevertheless, whilst HERA (2017) offered new Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) a single, simplified path of entry, they are still required to operate within the same regulatory regime as established providers and – given the role of expert peer review in quality assessments – are expected to follow comparable QA processes. One of the motivators for this project was to understand whether new providers would navigate QA in ways that were distinct from incumbents, and whether QA practices themselves facilitated or hindered innovation.

In many ways, universities are still working out how to operate within the expectations of consumer legislation. The Consumer and Markets Authority (CMA) considers a student's HE choices to be a major decision that involves significant financial consequences and major decision-making. Prospective applicants must therefore be furnished with accurate and timely information about their course choice at each stage of their interaction with the HEI; this information includes course title, core modules, contact hours and mode and means of delivery, expectations of feedback, overall methods of assessment, and a general indication of the status of staff who will be teaching. Failing to provide such information risks action by consumer law enforcers, by compliance partners, by HE sector bodies or directly by students (CMA 2015). In a sense, such legislature locks HEIs into course composition and learning and teaching strategy for the period of advertising, selection and study, all of which can constitute a 5-year cycle and might be considered to reduce opportunities for agile innovation.

Perhaps the most significant change in the political environment of HE was the introduction of a new English regulatory body – the OfS – in 2018. In addition to maintaining a register of providers, facilitating market entry and exit, and ensuring compliance against a range of conditions, the OfS seeks to stimulate enhancement – 'driving improvement above the high-quality baseline' – through the reflective analysis embodied in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), published in 2017, 2020 and 2023. In the latest TEF round, 23% of providers appealed their ratings which points to unsettled questions relating to reliability, consistency and value of judgements (WonkHE 2023). It is not yet clear whether the TEF recognises and increases quality, or whether it reinforces (and therefore rewards) quite traditional understandings (*ibid*; Su 2022).

In July 2022, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) announced its intention to demit its role as England's designated quality body for higher education, stating that the OfS would not allow it to fulfil its role in a way that was consistent with international standards (QAA 2022). This led to considerable uncertainty for an extended period during which providers waited to hear whether an alternative body would be appointed. In April 2023, the OfS decided to fulfil this role itself as an interim measure.

England has been subject to significant changes in its regulatory and funding regime, but the quality, QA and quality enhancement landscape of the UK has become more differentiated with devolution and the maturing of the English Regulatory Authority. Whilst assurance acts as the bedrock in all national contexts, each places different emphasis on enhancement. Scottish HEIs are required by the Scottish Funding Council to meet the requirements of the Quality Enhancement Framework, a process focussed on standards, student experience and engagement. They are subject to an Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR), and are expected to engage with the UK Quality Code, as well as a national programme of enhancement themes, concentrated on a topic expected to stimulate the sharing of innovation in strategy, policy and practice across the sector. Welsh providers are required by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales to have had a successful Quality Enhancement Review or Gateway Quality Review (Wales) conducted by the QAA. The Gateway Quality Review evaluates how well student interest is being protected, that standards are being upheld, and provides assurance that baseline regulatory requirements are being met. HEIs in Northern Ireland are required by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland (DfE(NI)) to participate in the Annual Provider Review and achieve a minimum outcome of at least 'meets requirements'. This revised Northern Irish assessment model seeks to promote institutional autonomy, incorporates student as partners, assures standards and value-for-money, sustains the international reputation of UK HE, and provides for intervention when necessary (HEFCE 2016).

Moving on from the political sphere, technology continues to both invite and demand innovation. Changes brought about by the 2020-21 COVID-19 online pivot are commonly regarded to have stimulated innovation in both teaching and QA practices (Universities UK 2020). These moments of development in QA processes – for example the use of more streamlined processes, collaborative operational steering/sprint groups, rapid approval plans, or more meaningful student engagement – are not routinely captured and leveraged across HEIs, despite calls for this. This catalyst for change can be considered not as a one-off event, but as a journey that began with the ICT age, had one point of catalysis with the introduction of MOOCs, another with the pandemic online pivot, and continues to have its next in the rapid expansion of big data and learning analytics. In the last two years, generative AI has transformed our understanding of information generation and creativity, and universities are challenged with protecting the integrity of the credentials they issue, particularly in assuring the integrity of assessments. Hand-in-hand with this, some colleagues seek a 'productive integration' in teaching and learning (McDonald *et al* 2024). More broadly, the volume of data and sophistication of learning analytics within the HE environment is growing rapidly and is being used to focus many opportunities for innovation such as monitoring student engagement, exploring awarding gaps, and dashboard/KPI approaches that inform intervention. In amongst these opportunities lies the challenge of producing meaningful data that can inform impactful action.

In addition to political and technological change, the economics of HE are now of major concern and can be expected to instigate significant change in the operating models of universities. Fixed (regulated) tuition fees alongside high levels of inflation, falling numbers of international students, and increasing costs of living are causing considerable concern as to the financial sustainability of HE, despite the OfS's latest analysis concluding that were in immediate danger but that the medium- to long-term outlook 'remained challenging'. Whilst impacts on different kinds of institutions can be expected to vary, larger, research-intensive universities are forecasting year-on-year income increases below the sectoral average through to 2026 (OfS 2023:13). In response, OfS is expecting to see rationalisation of activities, institutional consolidations, changes to delivery models (*ibid.*). In addition to uncertain income, universities face significant financial threat in the medium and long term because of cost base pressures that include staff costs, pensions, and 'back-office' processes; consolidation and automation may play a role here (PwC 2024).

### 3. Methodology

The project deployed a practice-led qualitative methodology aimed at uncovering effective ways of working amongst the HE community.

First, a literature review was prepared which aimed to identify frameworks and understandings of QA in UK HE, as well as QA strategies across a range of domains that support innovative practice. The review – available separately (Bond *et al* 2023) – explored definitions and the operationalisation of quality, standards, QA and quality enhancement in UK HE, briefly describing differences across countries within the United Kingdom. It then accounted for different perceptions of QA amongst academics, employers, and students before contrasting definitions of innovation in Higher Education. The inter-relationship between innovation and QA was explored through an interrogation of the extent to which QA processes support innovative practice and structures.

Second, the project team ran two webinars, hosted by the QAA; one webinar was aimed at those working in large providers and one at those in small and specialist HEIs. There was an open invitation to the sector to attend the webinars, issued through the QAA, with 160 people attending across the two events. The webinars were held in October 2023 and provided space for discussion of two key areas: (i) barriers and facilitators of innovation; and (ii) imagining the ideal QA or academic colleague to work with on innovation. During the webinars, participants were asked to self-select as having either primarily QA or academic-focused roles, and then split into smaller break out rooms grouped according to their role, to discuss the two key areas. Ideas and thoughts were gathered on digital whiteboards during the session and key themes were discussed and reflected upon by participants in the final parts of each session.

The literature review and webinars informed a research stage of the project, for which ethics approval was granted by the lead partner, NMITE.

A semi-structured qualitative survey was prepared and shared with the UK's HE community. This garnered 176 responses from 65 UK HEIs and provided a broad response set across a wide range of institutions. The initial findings from these data were used to inform themes and questions that could be explored during the focus group stage of the project, as well as providing a platform for participants to volunteer to be involved in one of the sessions.

A series of six, one-hour online semi-structured focus groups was then held, involving 25 participants. Broadly speaking, individuals from specialist providers were in different focus groups to those associated with large, multi-faculty universities. Focus groups supported the exploration of the interaction between innovation and QA, a topic which was considered as too complex and contextually specific for a survey. Participants were also asked to explore the interaction of QA and innovation in their contexts, and how QA processes could be used to better support innovation in HE. Focus groups were transcribed and analysed thematically using an inductive approach.

Finally, case studies were solicited that would exemplify innovative practice. Six case studies were secured using a template to facilitate consistent content.

## 4. Key findings

The high number of responses (n=176) reflects engagement with the issue from staff in a range of roles in different UK HEIs – including large institutions and small and specialist HEIs – and reinforces the project team's view that this was a timely and valid topic. The focus groups were made up of representatives predominantly from large HEIs, however the mix of roles was as mixed as the respondents to the survey.

The survey findings demonstrate the presence of sustained and competing pressures on those working in HE. Conversations in the focus groups were wide-ranging and touched upon barriers to innovation that were not directly related to QA, such as financial challenges, which appeared to hamper institutional appetite for innovation. These issues can negatively impact QA processes and systems through poor QA/Enhancement resourcing, thus stifling innovation.

The survey results did not paint a positive picture of the extent to which QA is perceived as supporting innovation: only 11.6% of respondents felt that QA fully supported innovation. However, examples of innovation in relation to QA were highlighted within the focus groups – predominantly from QA/Enhancement staff. Furthermore, all the focus group attendees who talked about seeing QA as a driver of innovation were employed at large HEIs, as opposed to small and specialist or other institutions. Representatives of smaller HEIs considered agility, as well as their inherently outward looking nature (to avoid stagnation in their little bubble), to be a strength of their innovative practices, thus QA as a driver was not necessarily foremost.

The drivers of innovation were viewed as student satisfaction, followed by meeting the needs of changing student body, and then to improve inclusivity. In order of perceived significance, the top-ranking domains where QA were considered as most helpful in supporting innovation were: institutional learning and teaching strategies; the capability of staff members, top-down transformation strategies; and bottom-up approaches. Sequentially, the QA domains thought as having the most positive impact were identified as: institutional learning and teaching strategies; capability of staff members; and student feedback. The survey also demonstrated a belief that most significant academic innovation was occurring through ongoing reflection and refinement by module leaders or teaching staff. These ideas were further developed within the focus groups, in which, 'staff-driven innovation' or even 'student-driven innovation' were referred to in terms of 'bottom-up' driving measures. Such innovation was typically motivated by a desire to address a range of professional challenges or goals, which could be subject-driven, for pedagogical reasons, or even be driven by self-interest (reduce own workload, better feedback from students, *etc.*). However, it should be highlighted that innovation is not risk-free for the individual (say at module or assessment level) or the institution at a programme or strategic level. It is not unusual for students to express a preference for something that is familiar simply for its familiarity. Innovation can be risky for staff whose 'teaching scores' and promotion prospects could be impacted. Support and space for staff to innovate and perhaps fail initially is essential; opportunity to iterate without fear of withdrawal of support is crucial.

In relation to the impact of COVID-19 measures in terms of leading to innovative changes in QA processes and procedures, almost two-thirds of survey participants viewed simplification and/or fast-tracking as approaches that challenged previous QA processes, with more than two-thirds of participants reporting that measures had been retained following the pandemic. This finding was reinforced by the feedback from the focus group participants who generally expressed positive views in relation to the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on QA and innovative practice in HEIs. Members of the focus groups also raised challenges about negative perceptions of QA that encompassed discussion on the QA processes and staff working in QA, as well as around issues of trust, myths and the need for myth-busting. COVID-19 provided opportunities for myth busting as staff at HEIs were required to re-read their own requirements (and those of relevant PSRBs) and re-evaluate their own practices – the rules were not as draconian as everyone thought.

We learned from the pandemic that QA and academic colleagues can work together very effectively, collaborating to effect change very quickly; the boundaries between QA and academic roles became more blurred, with more effective and trusting working relationships formed. Further, the institutional structures and processes that had long been in place were replaced for that period – barriers and silos were replaced with cross functional teams that supported rapid change and innovation. Critical review of existing institutional structures and processes may be key to change at even programme or module level.

Finally, a key theme that emerged out of the focus groups was the commitment and enthusiasm of the focus group participants for the subject matter of innovation and QA, which was coded as 'passion' in the data analysis process. This was a welcome outcome of the project.

## 5. Calls to action

In reviewing the current and medium-term climate for UK higher education, we have described a sector undergoing significant political, financial and technological change, to the extent that disruptive effects are likely to be felt in all institutions. Such disruption is an opportunity for innovation. We owe it to our colleagues and students to make a commitment that the efforts involved in innovative practice are as productive, positive, impactful and long-lasting as possible. It has been clear throughout this project – from the literature review through the survey, focus groups and case studies – that this is most likely to happen when academics are working alongside QA professionals in a constructive (and where possible collaborative) way.

Therefore, our first call to action is for appropriately resourced QA teams who are intimately connected with academic innovation through carefully thought-through structures and processes. When QA staff time is limited, the impetus is, of necessity, on meeting compliance requirements rather than supporting enhancement and innovation. Reducing QA expertise in an environment of change is both a lost opportunity and is likely to increase inter-team conflict. QA will always have an important and influential role to play, but whether this is (to use the words of our survey) as a thought leader, facilitator or blocker depends – in part – on how many courses they are supporting and how much time they have to invest in helping find creative solutions to genuinely perplexing dilemmas that directly impact student experience, academic wellbeing, and institutional compliance.

This leads into our second call to action – that institutional leaders and colleagues harness the passion for high-quality innovative practice that we know is within HEIs. Throughout this work we have been overwhelmed by the scale of engagement in our events, and a genuine commitment to more productive innovations that positively impact student learning and wellbeing. Whilst the COVID-19 online pivot happened in extreme circumstances and at a speed that few would have the appetite to revisit, it was effective in demonstrating that QA processes can be responsive and agile – even where temporary measures have not been retained, it has shown the art of the possible. Given the pressure in the HE sector, there is a case to build on this experience in a more measured timeframe – working together as teams and being willing to flex processes and learn continuously.

Finally, we conclude with our observations of new providers and what can be learned from them. This work originated in an observation that new HE entrants are by necessity quality-driven, and often realise impressive achievements in short timescales from a standing start, such as demonstrating the capabilities, structure and processes necessary to receive degree-awarding powers. This project has

benefitted from the participation of institutions varying in size, maturity and degree of specialisation. In amongst those, new providers exemplify two attributes that have emerged as being critical to productive quality-driven innovation. First, they are safer 'spaces to fail': institutional-level innovation goals, rapid learning, shared values, and exposure to QA as a critical success factor create environments of psychological safety and agility. Second, new providers have smaller (usually 'start-up' sized) teams but still need QA professionals – this tends towards a higher QA:academic ratio than that seen in more mature HEIs, and they are more likely to be co-located. These two success features: space to fail, and productive collaboration are strategies that can support universities of any size and type. Whilst the most effective interventions will be particular to institution and context, the following section outlines more strategies to achieve the goal of high-quality innovation.

## 6. Managing the interaction of quality assurance and innovation

After concluding all phases of the project, reviewing the input from both data findings and that from colleagues across the sector, the project team have identified three key areas (people, structure, and process) to which HEIs could look to maximise effective and best practice at the interaction of QA and innovation. The external and internal factors that impact, constrain or sometimes demand innovation in HEIs are many and varied, and innovation can happen because of individual effort, institutional requirement or external developments. The recommendations may apply differently to each of these scenarios but are designed to prompt thinking and support teams and institutions ensure they have the right relationships, structures and processes in place to enable innovative practice to flourish.

### 6.1. People

#### 6.1.1. Promote Understanding

**Project Finding:** Staff often report a lack of clarity over the contributions QA and academic colleagues can and should each make to innovation projects. In other cases, colleagues hold misunderstandings of each other's roles. A desire for better understanding to inform their work was a key theme emerging from discussions during the webinar.

**Consideration:** Do your staff working in different roles understand each other's work and potential contribution?

**Recommendation:** Build time for induction and understanding of roles into staff inductions and ongoing work. Consider:

buddying of key staff

opportunities for work shadowing

- QA staff joining or contributing to academic staff development / teaching and learning courses
- academics attending QA sector briefings.

#### 6.1.2. Build Trust

**Project Finding:** Colleagues driving innovation report feeling exposed and at risk. This was reflected in the idea of asking forgiveness not permission raised at the webinars. There can be a lack of confidence amongst innovators in advocating for their ideas in the face of critical review by QA processes.

**Consideration:** Having a psychologically safe space, where staff do not fear being wrong, or can admit to gaps in their knowledge, and feel supported to explore ideas that may not yet be fully formed is critical to facilitate effective innovation and collaboration between academic innovators and quality professionals.

**Recommendation:** Building understanding (1i) is the first step to enable the development of trust. However, there is a need for relationships to be nurtured on an ongoing basis to enable colleagues to discuss and refine ideas in a truly collaborative spirit. Building psychological safety and allowing people to explore uncertainty and develop their thinking through discussion is key. (see 2iii). Build and instil a collaborative ethos across your innovation project and institution.

### 6.1.3. Break down the myths

**Project Finding:** Misinformation about the constraints imposed by different stakeholders is often used as a barrier to change and innovation.

**Consideration:** Are there myths in your institution about what QA teams/processes, PSRBs, the CMA or OfS will allow? Do colleagues fall back on these to avoid change or challenge? Or does out of date information or perceptions hamper innovation?

**Recommendation:** Myth busting! Every time a colleague says, "We can't do this because 'X' won't allow it", make sure this is checked. What's the evidence? Is this an absolute or are there ways to adapt your proposal to meet key principles that might be involved? Do not allow myths to prevent positive change.

## 6.2. Structure

### 6.2.1. Review structures

**Project Finding:** Team and departmental structures can operate as silos and create artificial barriers to change by preventing collaborative working.

**Consideration:** Are your current team and department structures supporting the process and innovation you may want to achieve, or are they reinforcing barriers and silos?

**Recommendation:** Critically review structures in your institution and the impact these have on both relationships and potential collaborative working across departments and areas. Design sprints, skunkworks or cross-functional development teams can support work on radical innovations.

### 6.2.2. Plan for success

**Project Finding:** When quality professionals are only invited to the gatekeeping aspects of projects, they struggle to contribute in ways that are not perceived as adding barriers when academics feel they just want sign-off.

**Consideration:** Who is on the innovation team and where can they best add value? Stakeholders, be they academic or professional services, must work together on the journey, not just meet at the destination.

**Recommendation:** Build a coalition of the enthusiastic. Wide representation from the start will ensure that when an innovation goes through a quality process, key questions have been considered by the whole team from the start.

### 6.2.3. Go beyond benchmarks

**Project Finding:** Established benchmarks and standards can, if interpreted too rigidly, constrain opportunities for innovation. Myths about the rules of different external stakeholders and QA itself are rife.

**Consideration:** Innovation can mean operating with uncertainty and without established reference points or benchmarks. Innovators may need to establish standards rather than working to them.

**Recommendation:** Think about what alternatives there are to the established benchmarks in your discipline/area and be willing to consider establishing what quality looks like in your own context.

## 6.3. Process

### 6.3.1. Dynamic QA processes

**Project Finding:** QA processes are too often seen as constraints on, rather than enablers of, innovation. QA processes themselves need to be progressive to enable innovative practice to flourish.

**Consideration:** Have your QA processes become overly focused on outputs, paperwork and serving external drivers rather than enabling critical thinking and collaboration that benefits students? Did you adopt leaner QA processes during the COVID-19 pandemic and did you retain or reflect on these changes?

Learning and Teaching Strategies were identified in the survey as a key driver of innovation – does yours articulate how QA teams will support its execution?

**Recommendation:** Try adopting a blank canvas approach to reviewing your QA processes. If you start from scratch what might your QA processes look like? What are the outcomes you are looking for? What's the balance between meetings to discuss and refine thinking and review of submitted paperwork? Look for the quick win – what is the incremental change you could make that would positively impact QA or academic colleagues. Be ready to articulate this and willing to act on it.

### 6.3.2. Enhance Quality, don't just assure it

**Project Finding:** QA processes too often focus on assurance at the expense of enhancement.

**Consideration:** Do your QA processes truly enable and encourage sharing of good practice and innovation?

**Recommendation:** Institutions must embrace the role of QA in supporting effective innovation and ensure it is adequately resourced and clear expectations on its potential for positive impact are set. Make explicit opportunities within your processes to share innovation and/or good practice and make this happen and check it is happening! Small innovations may already be happening under the radar, and if these are not made visible then opportunities for wider innovation and growth are lost.

### 6.3.3. Design Space to Fail

**Project Finding:** Proposing innovation involves personal and professional risk as well as questions about potential failure. This can lead to maintenance of the status quo being the path of least resistance, especially if QA processes around change are long-winded so fixing problems becomes costly.

**Consideration:** Innovation involves trying new approaches, strategies or processes that may not work. Innovating means bearing the risk of failure, or not achieving the intended outcome. Providing space to fail with mechanisms for quick recovery is key to facilitating innovation. Be open to the entrepreneurial opportunity that comes with a little risk and avoid designing this out.

**Recommendation:** Processes need early review and intervention strategies, or flexibility to enable rapid response where an innovation initially approved proves to be unsuccessful. Avoid the use of performance metrics that disincentivise risk taking. Celebrate innovations so that other colleagues are incentivised to propose changes openly rather than try to achieve them under the radar.

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## When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

### Case Study of Practice

# Alumni-informed Programme Development and Education for Innovation

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## 1. Context

This case study shares an innovation that commenced in the School of Visual Communication, Art and Design, UWTSU. Alumni feedback became integral to the design and delivery of programmes suited to dynamic work environments. Opportunities for alumni engagement came to the fore when their feedback provided evidence of a demand for a new-to-the-UK 'Brand and Advertising' course that responded to industry needs.

The advertising industry demands creative ideas generation every day, and a high degree of flexibility and adaptability when dealing with clients and current trends. This challenged many educational norms, and alumni persuaded the University's QA team that pedagogical styles and assessment strategies needed to change to reflect this requirement. Subsequently, the model has informed the QAA Quality Code in Learning and Teaching and many international initiatives.

## 2. The innovation

We used intelligence from alumni to inform curriculum development as well as day-to-day teaching and learning, as they are uniquely placed to reflect and comment on their own learning experiences, arguably, much more so than current students.

A focus on developing more innovative learners drove the approach, as it aligned with the needs of the creative industries, offering up-to-date insights and clarity as to what past students felt in regard to the merits and demerits of their course of study.

Through enhanced engagement with past students who had studied in the department, it was anticipated that (a) new provision could be better mapped to current industry needs and shortfalls; (b) current students could obtain advice and thoughts from past students on a regular basis, both formally and informally; and (c) arguments for updates and change could be fed up to department heads and QA teams, based on these insights.

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The notion of using alumni to inform developments was rooted in an informal approach developed in the 1980s, which became formalised in 2004-05 following a successful HEA (now AdvanceHE) review of creative enterprise in the creative industries (Kellet, 2006). Known and published as the 'Continual Conceptual Review Model' (Penaluna and Penaluna 2006, 2015), it subsequently informed University of Wales Trinity Saint David's (UWTSD) enterprise and entrepreneurship team, and was used as a research model by the International Institute for Creative Entrepreneurial Development (UWTSD IICED).

A watershed event in 2005 illustrates the potential, as alumni intelligence helped to drive significant change in the way that learning and teaching moved towards andragogy and heutagogy, and assessment of learning incorporated abilities such as being adaptive and flexible, and multi-solution, directed problem-solvers.

In 2012 the Director of UWTSD IICED chaired the QAA's first guidance documentation for all UK HEIs and contributed to a Government review of university-business collaboration, where business owners applauded the initiative (BEIS/Wilson Review, 2012). Subsequently, the EU-Joint Research Centre and the OECD drew upon the approach and QAA's (2018) updated Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Guidance clarified the opportunities it brings.

### 3. Outcomes

The intervention featured in research relating to the development of the EU Joint Research Centre's EntreComp (Entrepreneurial Competencies) Framework. Here, future orientated visioning abilities, opportunity-spotting (a precursor to problem-solving), and coping with uncertainty, ambiguity and risk feature as distinct areas of competence. In UK terms, QAA's Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Guidance references alumni engagement in six of its 27 descriptions of best practice, and the QAA Quality Code Guidance on Learning and Teaching references it in two of its eight pages of guidance.

UWTSD's International Institute for Creative Entrepreneurial Development attributes the approach to its UK-leading success in graduate start-ups and business survival rates, due to the connectivity of staff with alumni, as HEBCIS data is more readily captured, and longitudinal insights more easily gained.

Flash surveys offer insights to what alumni university experience has supported (or not) in their careers. Whilst only been undertaken through the context of a peer reviewed paper once, the findings are notable. Here, 49 responses to questions designed to elicit feedback over the value of their education highlighted three important areas:

- Lecturers should ensure that students keep a time record of working hours, to better facilitate costing and estimating exercise in their future careers.
- Lecturers should discuss and debate value metrics, to gain insights into how different clients or customers would value their contribution.
- Lectures should simulate the realities of workplaces as much as possible, including shifting information as data becomes available, taking into account forces of change.

When subsequently asked about the importance of the above, the top ranking reply related to simulating the realities of workplaces; 91.84% agreed with the notion that this ability had helped their careers.

Engaging alumni has had significantly greater success than anticipated, moving from a local to international initiatives.

### 4. Takeaways

Alumni can offer insights that relate to curriculum design and pedagogical approaches, and from a longitudinal perspective.

Current students may not be best placed to offer constructive feedback on their learning experiences. Alumni often value things differently once they have engaged with the workplace.

QA in Enterprise and Entrepreneurship can help to facilitate these approaches, and better prepare learners for the challenges beyond graduation.

Perceived quality issues can change when alumni are engaged and more holistic perspectives gained.

If used well, alumni can engage with current students and support their learning.

Teaching learners to be innovative requires learning and assessment strategies that ensure creativity and curiosity are recognised and valued, not predetermined outcomes such as those found in tests and examinations.

## 5. Additional resources

- Understanding the different 'gogies' that can support learning for innovation  
Jones, C., Penaluna, K., & Penaluna, A. (2019). The Promise of Andragogy, Heutagogy and Academagogy to Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education Pedagogy. *Education + Training*, 61 (9). pp. 1170-1186. ISSN 0040-0912 Online at: [www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ET-10-2018-0211/full/html](http://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ET-10-2018-0211/full/html)
- An insight into European Research that supports the case / led the development of the EU EntreComp Framework:  
Komarkova, I., Gagliardi, D., Conrads, J., and Collado A. (2015). *Entrepreneurship Competence: An Overview of Existing Concepts, Policies and Initiatives – Final Report*. Luxembourg (Luxembourg): Publications Office of the European Union; 2015. JRC96531. Online at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC96531>
- A practical user guide into assessing and evaluating entrepreneurial learning, includes creativity, visioning, opportunity recognition and working in situations of ambiguity and risk – as developed by the EU's Joint Research Centre:  
McCallum, E., Weicht, R., McMullan, L., & Price, A. (2018). *EntreComp into Action – Get inspired, make it happen: A user guide to the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework*. Bacigalupo, M. & O'Keeffe, W. (Eds), EUR 29105 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. Online at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC109128>
- A paper that moves the entrepreneurial learning agenda from business thinking to developing creative innovative learners, based on creative industries approaches to engaging alumni:  
Penaluna, A., & Penaluna, K. (2008). Business Paradigms in Einstellung: Harnessing Creative Mindsets: A Creative Industries Perspective. *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship*, 21:2, 231-250, Online at: [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08276331.2008.10593588](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08276331.2008.10593588)
- Assessment of ideas generation, innovation and opportunity recognition are central to developing and learning entrepreneurial behaviours. This paper highlights clear parallels between approaches from "design" disciplines, who are tasked to develop creative thinkers who solve other people's problems:  
Penaluna, A., & Penaluna, K. (2009). Assessing creativity: drawing from the experience of the UK's creative design educators. *Education + Training*, Vol. 51 No. 8/9, pp. 718-732. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00400910911005262>
- This paper offers insights into a classroom practice where neuroscience informs learning teaching and assessment related to creativity, visioning skills, dealing with ambiguity demonstrating flexibility and adaptability:  
Penaluna, A., & Penaluna, K. (2021). In search of entrepreneurial competencies: Peripheral vision and multidisciplinary inspiration. *Industry and Higher Education*, 35(4), 471-484. Online at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422220963796>
- QA Guidance in learning and teaching that supports those wishing to engage their alumni:  
QAA (2018). *UK Quality Code, Advice and Guidance: Learning and Teaching*. Online at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/advice-and-guidance/learning-and-teaching](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/advice-and-guidance/learning-and-teaching)
- Influential UK Guidance that helps to ensure that all subjects and disciplines can develop enterprising creators who demonstrate the ability to add value to society. This has numerous references to alumni engagement:

QAA (2018). Enterprise and Entrepreneurship. Online at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/membership-areas-of-work/teaching-learning-and-assessment/enterprise-and-entrepreneurship](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/membership-areas-of-work/teaching-learning-and-assessment/enterprise-and-entrepreneurship)

- A seminal report from UK Government that has significantly influenced policy and practice development, based on the needs of UK industry. Page 50 supports the notion that university assessment needs to be fit for purpose – as proposed by alumni in this case study:  
Wilson, T. (2012). *Business University Collaboration: The Wilson Review*. Department for Business Innovation and Skills. Online at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/business-university-collaboration-the-wilson-review](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/business-university-collaboration-the-wilson-review)



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## 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<sup>8</sup>

## 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.

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<sup>8</sup> De Montfort University



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)





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## When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

### Case Study of Practice

# Curriculum Blueprinting: A Design Methodology

Lydia Arnold<sup>9</sup>, Lisa Barnett<sup>9</sup>, Simone Clarke<sup>9</sup> & Steve Barnett<sup>9</sup>

## 1. Context

Harper Adams University is a small, specialist institution and the innovation presented in this case study was undertaken across all of our undergraduate provision. Stakeholders were from all parts of the university, including the central learning and teaching team, academic departments, students' union and student body, and facilities managers, as well as other professional services teams, and technical staff.

Our approach to quality management is embedded across the institution, but led by our Academic Registrar and colleagues within a central team. Quality enhancement and QA functions work very closely together.

## 2. The innovation

We developed an innovative methodology for curriculum review, focusing on programme-level thinking to ensure that the student-journey was at the heart of the development activity. We worked to link the development into all university functions, rather than making it solely the interest of teaching staff, because we recognise the importance of a one-team approach. The review was reflective and recognised problems which occur in curriculum work, as a contested space. One of the key challenges was finding time simply to get together, so we developed an approach where protected time took colleagues off-timetable, providing space for focused development work. The methodology gave steps for each team to take, starting with programme-level planning and developing a 'blueprint' of the student journey, and then moving into thinking about what the exact programme would look like. Only after these steps did the process of module-commissioning take place.

We wanted to refresh our curriculum and design-out challenges which are common in HE. Curriculum renewal is a special moment in time, and we can make choices which help or hinder student and staff experiences; we took an anticipatory approach to the design. The project team shared a values-statement of how the work would be undertaken and a member of the team had dedicated responsibility for accessibility and inclusion. It was important that professional services colleagues were involved deeply in curriculum, teams and validation processes, so that their vantage point was visible to programme teams.

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<sup>9</sup> Harper Adams University



We wanted to ensure that the process was not unnecessarily difficult; we wanted it to be enjoyable and fruitful. Making space to engage, and reducing documentation mattered. We moved from documenting every step to holding live events to generate constructive feedback or critical questions. This was a changing tone from a model which was previously based on 'proposal and scrutiny'. We opted to take a collegial and collaborative tone, where ideas were presented in-person and discussed, with feedback from different parts of the university. Issues could be dealt with constructively by bringing different stakeholders together.

The project was approximately two years. The first stage was a trial with three trailblazer course areas, who helped co-develop the methodology. The second stage involved all remaining undergraduate courses. Third, and ongoing, is work to connect curriculum teams into all the parts of the university to ensure thoughtful planning about rollout (and teach out the previous curriculum).

### **3. Outcomes**

We are currently conducting a formal evaluation of our work, with an external reviewer appointed to assess the impact and the lessons learned. Despite the ongoing nature of this evaluation, certain transformative outcomes are already evident.

- Programme-level thinking has become ingrained in our discourse surrounding learning, teaching, assessment, course development, and validation. Recognising the importance of considering the students' entire journey in curriculum design is a perspective we are committed to retaining.
- Engaging professional services teams has heightened our awareness around issues of accessibility and inclusion. A notable development from this is the inclusion of a professional services team member, such as learner support or academic guidance, on all our development teams and validation panels, enhancing the inclusivity of our courses.
- Collaboration with industry and schools has prompted us to rethink our graduates attributes for the future, ensuring our curriculum remains relevant and forward-thinking.
- By narrating the student journey at the design stage, we have strived to simplify our documentation, making the presentation of ideas more accessible and streamlined.
- The collaboration between diverse teams – including facilities, estates, technology, and academic departments – in rolling out the curriculum has fostered a greater understanding of our operational context. This is promoting a culture of mutual respect and cooperation, which are university values and the basis of our new University Strategy (Together we Make the Difference).

The curriculum is now in the rollout-phase, and we are actively seeking feedback from students enrolled in these courses to gauge their effectiveness. Simultaneously, we are reviewing our methodology to better understand its impact and the challenges. Our goal was to develop a manageable, inclusive curriculum, grounded in authentic assessments that reflect true learning. While we have made significant progress in developing and partially rolling out these courses, it will take another three to four years to complete a full lifecycle of the curriculum and fully evaluate this.

Looking ahead, we plan to apply this methodology to the development of other courses. At the core of our approach is a focus on programme-level outcomes and graduate attributes, fostering deep discussions and debates, and prioritising curriculum work. Our methodology is not rigid but is based on a set of principles we advocate for flexible application.

### **4. Takeaways**

- Having clear values underpinning curriculum work acts as a compass for all that follows.
- Curriculum is contested as it involved making choices about what can and cannot be included; respect and trust among colleagues is therefore an essential foundation of constructive curriculum innovation.

- Considering how and when teams can be enabled to engage deeply is important to success.
- Events and opportunities for engagement across teams helps to identify possible challenges and opportunities; curriculum should not be developed in academic silos.
- Considering the programme journey can, and should, drive the development of modules and assessment.



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## When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

### Case Study of Practice

# Connecting Enhancement & Innovation to Assurance through Programme Approval Processes

Helen King<sup>10</sup>

## 1. Context

Bath Spa University is a medium-sized English institution. The innovation presented below took place as part of a quality governance restructure. At BSU and its educational partner institutions, QA is led by the Academic Governance & Quality team which is responsible for L&T-related policies. Processes for the design and approval of new programmes are undertaken in collaboration with Portfolio & Planning team. The development and delivery of policies and processes are also undertaken in collaboration with the new Director of Learning Innovation, Development & Skills and the Teaching Expertise Development team.

## 2. The innovation

We were keen to streamline our academic governance processes to enable more effective use of time in formal committees and to better connect QA with quality enhancement, particularly with consideration for our increasing number of educational partnerships. In early 2023, a new central learning and teaching unit was created to bring together support for quality enhancement. This Learning Innovation & Skills team, led by the new Director of Learning Innovation Development & Skills, comprises Academic Skills (ASK) plus Schools Technical Services (STS) plus the new Teaching Expertise Development team (TED).

With dedicated support for L&T enhancement now in place through the Director and the TED team, progress was rapidly made to embed support for innovation and enhancement into the QA processes. Feedback from a pedagogic perspective is provided on all new programmes as they are being designed, and on proposed module and programme modifications. In addition, support is offered to programme teams in the form of guides, conversations and workshops on programme and learning design. A set of Education Design Principles were devised to provide a summary expression of our 2030 Education

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<sup>10</sup> Bath Spa University



Strategy, thereby making it more straightforward for programme design and review to be aligned to the Strategy's objectives.

The major change to processes was in the creation of a Curriculum Approval Panel to replace a much larger committee. The previous committee comprised many of the key stakeholders who had already been involved in earlier stages of design and approval, including Schools-based committees. The new Panel was smaller in its membership but with more targeted expertise including student representation, Pro Vice-Chancellor Academic Planning, Head of Academic Portfolio Development and four academics (from different disciplines) with track records in L&T enhancement and innovation. The panel is serviced by a member of the Academic Governance & Quality team and chaired by the Director of Learning Innovation Development & Skills. Having this Director chair the panel, together with an agenda that includes sharing of good practice, has brought an innovation and enhancement perspective to its work. Examples of good practice are gathered and shared from the programme designs and module and programme modifications; common issues are identified (e.g. optimum number of optional modules, word count equivalencies, authentic assessments); and connections are made to other initiatives and projects. Rather than simply being a 'rubber-stamping' exercise, the panel's meetings are a lively space for debate, learning and sharing, and the approval process has engaged colleagues in more thoughtful and strategically-led design.

### **3. Outcomes**

The differences are outlined above and are a qualitative summary of informal feedback from programme leaders, Curriculum Approval Panel members and the chair of the panel. These new processes have only been in place since the beginning of the 2023-24 academic year, so there are no firmer impact measures at this stage. Anecdotally, we feel that we have achieved the original aim and that the new processes bring together QA and QE in a more meaningful way, enabling enhancement and innovation and the articulation of this in programme specifications that goes beyond a 'tick box' exercise.

### **4. Takeaways**

- Importance of collaboration between QA and quality enhancement teams in all aspects of process and policy development.
- Co-creation of programme design and review to bring a range of expert perspectives (academics, students, QE and QA teams and other professional services).
- Opportunities afforded by having someone responsible for QE chairing the Curriculum Approval (QA) panel.



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## When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

### Case Study of Practice

# Embedding a New Curriculum Enhancement Framework

Katrina Swanton<sup>11</sup>

## 1. Context

Edinburgh Napier University's central QA team is located within the university's Department for Learning & Teaching Enhancement (responsible for Academic Development, Student Academic Skills Development; and Academic Quality) and works in liaison with the university's five academic schools which comprise a varied numbers of subject groups (departments). The management of the operational elements of QA is devolved to the schools (supported by school-based quality-focussed administrative staff). The central QA team is responsible for setting and monitoring relevant policy and practice for the university.

## 2. The innovation

During the development of Edinburgh Napier University's new Learning & Teaching Strategy in 2021, it was agreed that a new Curriculum Enhancement Framework be developed. This sought to ensure that all Edinburgh Napier University's academic programmes are designed to be student-focussed; support the development of digital and information literacy skills; and support the strengthening of citizenship and community. The Framework also identified five themes against which programmes are encouraged to work into the curriculum: employability; research and practice integration; sustainability; inclusion; and global outlook. The themes were determined following consultation from staff and students and sought to acknowledge the university's existing strengths and where we wanted to improve. The Edinburgh Napier Curriculum Enhancement Framework (termed ENhance for short) was intended to:

- Provide a shared reference point and vocabulary;
- Give a clearer structure to curriculum design and enhancement work, and the support on offer for this;
- Facilitate more systematic sharing of existing effective practice;

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<sup>11</sup> Edinburgh Napier University



- Make internal expertise in curriculum development, from academic and professional services colleagues, more accessible; and
- Support and encourage external sharing of effective practice.

Initially programme teams were invited to individual meetings to talk about their curriculum as part of the process to demonstrate engagement with ENhance, but it was quickly realised that this would not be sustainable at scale. Instead it was agreed that consideration of engagement with ENhance should instead be integrated into the university's quality processes: approval; annual monitoring and review; and periodic review (which also includes activity one year after the review). In addition a new dialogic approach was incorporated into the midpoint of the periodic review cycle to offer programmes further opportunities for consideration against the ENhance threshold.

The QA Officers take an active role in contributing to judgements around ENhance thresholds (with support from Learning & Teaching specialists). All hold at least Associate Fellowship with Advance HE as part of an intentional action to upskill our QA specialists on teaching and supporting learning practices.

### 3. Outcomes

Module and programme leaders are being actively encouraged to engage with the Curriculum Enhancement Framework at key Quality touchpoints.

We have incorporated opportunities for colleagues to better express their strengths and areas for development amongst the ENhance themes as part of the provision record (programme specification); and incorporated greater opportunity to reflect on the impact of that engagement in annual monitoring and periodic review.

Successful engagement in enhancement (meeting threshold of demonstrable engagement in all core themes and at least three of the additional themes) is a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for the university's Learning & Teaching Strategy, and nearly 30% of the university's programmes have already achieved this threshold.

Staff are beginning to understand that there is flexibility in how they can utilise the Curriculum Enhancement Framework, for example concepts around environmental sustainability may look very different in an English literature programme than it might in an Architecture Technology programme and requiring programme teams to reflect on this through annual and periodic monitoring and review, the university has been able to surface some case studies for sharing positive practice within the university.

While we are still at a relatively early stage in the implementation of this embedded approach, we were delighted that our approach to embed the ENhance Framework within our existing quality procedures was recognised as a feature of good practice in our most recent QAA Review (QESR, 2024).

### 4. Takeaways

- Partnership working between staff responsible for leading learning and teaching innovation and the staff responsible for QA and enhancement is essential.
- Avoid requiring staff across the Institution to do more, when it is possible to integrate into and improve the value of existing tasks and processes.
- Support Quality specialist staff to improve their understanding and confidence in innovative learning and teaching practice, for example through engagement with Advance HE Fellowship.



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## When Quality Assurance Meets Innovation in Higher Education

### Case Study of Practice

# Embedding the Education Inspection Framework into HE Quality Assurance Processes

Sharon Green<sup>12</sup>

## 1. Context

The Office of Apprenticeships and Skills (OAS) is an independent department recently created within the University of Lincoln. OAS provides expert guidance and direction to all staff involved in the delivery of apprenticeship programmes and their employers. It maintains the key university systems, documents, and records relating to all apprenticeship operations, and is responsible for the management and facilitation of external reviews and audits. The Office is at the forefront of developing an exemplary apprenticeship and skills experience, championing continual improvement and consistent high performance across all areas of the university to ensure ongoing compliance and the sharing of best practice across academic and professional services teams. OAS also operates as an End Point Assessment Organisation for Integrated Degree Apprenticeship programmes.

## 2. The innovation

In response to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) audit conducted in Autumn/Winter 2022, an auditing team was established within the Office of Apprenticeships and Skills (OAS). In April 2023, new team members were recruited to OAS and key auditing activities were arranged based on findings from the ESFA audit. 16 auditing activities were completed between April and August 2023. Ahead of the 23/24 academic year, an annual auditing plan was produced and shared with schools. 9 planned audits were completed in September and October 2023. For every audit completed, the OAS produces and shares a report with schools on its findings. Good quality practice is highlighted, and an action plan is included for areas of improvement or follow-up actions.

The OAS team lead on cross-institutional preparation for, and organisation of, internal and external institutional reviews/verifications and external audits of apprenticeship provision, including Ofsted inspection/monitoring visits, Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) assurance reviews and Office for Students (OfS) End Point Assessment assurance reviews. The team ensures that the University fully

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<sup>12</sup> University of Lincoln





understands and meets the requirements of, and is fully prepared for, external audits and reviews, by developing internal audits, running regular updates, training sessions, and developing associated learning materials. They hold regular apprenticeship conferences for both internal staff and wider employer networks, to ensure all parties are up to date with regulations and developments in apprenticeship provision. They support apprenticeship delivery teams across schools and colleges to lead institutional awareness and knowledge of education policy and changes in relation to apprenticeships, and manage any associated dissemination required through interpretation and explanation of complex systems and processes. OAS have taken responsible for the accuracy of the data return, submitted to the ESFA, which is used to calculate institutional funding, and contributes to all official government statistics. Funding for apprenticeships is based on a strict rule-based system which must be accurate, timely and detailed. Monthly reviews of payments and error reports were instigated and are now completed and reviewed by OAS to recognise where funding is being lost and how these issues can be prevented/resolved. A robust audit schedule has been produced for 2023-24 academic year and bespoke audits are offered to all schools ad hoc. 30 audits have been completed to date since April 2023 to support quality measures and provide guidance and support on best practice and collaborative practices. The University's ESFA QA review was concluded in January 2023 providing assurance that continuous improvement activities are having a positive impact. Improvements have been implemented to the service offered as an EPAO alongside development of processes in line with OfS guidelines.

### **3. Quality Assurance**

The apprenticeship levy makes it almost compulsory for employers to offer apprenticeship training, it continues to spark a national rethink about how apprenticeships are delivered. It is more than a financial requirement to invest, with its long list of compliance rules and regulations and so our role in directing and inspiring teams to realise our shared vision of excellence must be more than just about being compliant. Building agility and resilience across teams is essential and we lead by example with a pragmatic approach to QA and compliance. OAS drive the quality of apprenticeship provision across different schools, bringing together standardised practice to support quality alongside ensuring the individual disciplines maintain the unique elements that ensure excellent provision. OAS also delivers a high-quality End Point Assessment (EPA) Service to deliver secure, valid, and robust EPAs, as specified in Integrated Degree Apprenticeship Assessment Plans. The team leads the development and integrity of the University's policies and processes governing EPAO, ensuring that they meet national external requirements. Being able to constructively critique our effectiveness is essential in the different parts of our institutional function where pragmatic decision making has developed to consider the wider implications of colleagues. Inspections require us to strive for excellence, but we find that strategic plans can confuse what this means and how we achieve it. We believe it's simply customer satisfaction. The vision of excellence needs to be simple; all stakeholders can then understand it. We can only get consistent success in delivery when whole teams adapt/involve supporting delivery model and focus on performance goals embedded within our quality cycles. In the current unprecedented levels of competition in education it is not enough to deliver agile programmes, it is essential to build sustainable agility by extending those agile principals across the entire institution to drive better and have all-round excellence. This is an agility as a culture, a mindset, and an operating model; an enhanced way of performing deliveries towards excellence.

### **4. Outcomes**

Assessment should be used to check and develop apprentices' understanding, to inform innovative teaching, and to help apprentices embed and use their knowledge, skills, and behaviours fluently, rather than as an exercise in memorising disconnected facts to pass a test. Our QA focus will be on how assessment is used to support the teaching of the curriculum. This means that we will consider how well apprentices are doing in relation to the point they have reached in the curriculum. Assessment should be used to help identify the next steps for apprentices and their employers and to make sure that they are sufficiently prepared for the next stage in their learning journey or for end point assessment.

OAS does not spend significant amounts of time looking at the internal progress and attainment data collected within school. We expect any collection of assessment data to be proportionate with a clear strategy around impact. As part of annual self-assessment reporting, we want to see that assessment data is used to inform clear actions as part of our annual quality improvement cycle of actions and activities. We also look out for overuse and misuse of assessment, expecting managers and programme leads to understand its limitations. Moreover, the Ofsted Inspection Handbook explicitly states that, although national assessments and examinations are 'useful indicators outcomes', they only represent 'a sample' of what apprentices have learned, and this is only valuable in the context of their progress in the wider curriculum. We are looking for meaningful assessment, not meaningless data.

## 5. Takeaways

- We look at how our curriculum equips apprentices with the knowledge, skills, and behaviours they need for success in the future, helping them overcome any barriers caused by social disadvantage.
- We pay attention to whether academics notice gaps in knowledge, skills and behaviours and the actions that programme leads take to fill these, to secure apprentices' readiness for future learning.
- We look for coherently planned and sequenced curriculum to ensure that apprentices are working towards defined milestone and end points.
- We expect high ambitions for apprentices, irrespective of their starting points, and particularly in relation to retention within their specialist sectors.
- We expect leaders to demonstrate a plan and to show that they are taking action to implement changes to the curriculum as part of effective self-assessment reporting.