

Reframing Assessment: Challenging Sector Policy Constraints Through Creative Practice

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The Problem Space

"From *exam robots* to *intrapreneurs*"

"I spent 18 years in secondary teaching. Assessment was terminal. Now I work with degree apprentices and see the creative competencies employers want. What happens in the middle is the tricky bit."

Why Start with Policy?



Policies frame the
assessment culture



Discourses are powerful,
they shape what is possible

“My DEE project is about developing creative, authentic practice—but we need to understand the barriers first.”

Research Overview



"Assessment policies are not neutral - they shape the conditions for or against innovation."



Compliance & Standardisation



Managerialism in Assessment



Pressure from AI & Rankings



Neoliberal Influences

Assessment policies in UK universities have become tightly bound up with **managerial control**, **standardisation**, and **compliance**. They claim to protect standards — but may unintentionally suppress innovation.

As a former secondary teacher and now a university lecturer, I've seen how institutional processes often override good pedagogy.

We know assessment drives learning. But what happens when policy prioritises efficiency, deadlines, and misconduct detection over creativity, agency, and process?

This study set out to explore that — by analysing policy documents from five universities using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, I examined how language constructs power, risk, and compliance in assessment."

What the Literature Tells Us

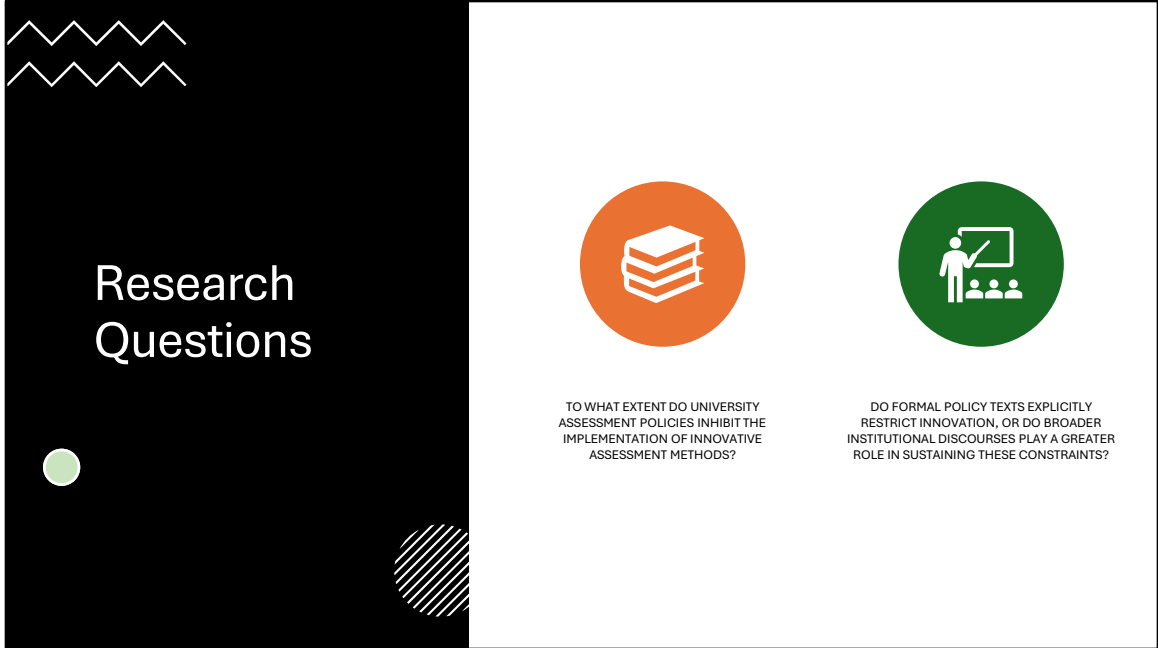
- **Assessment = Power**
Not just admin — assessment policies regulate student and academic behaviour (QAA, Fairclough, Raaper).
- **Barriers to Innovation**
Risk aversion, bureaucracy, and standardisation block creative assessment models (Deneen & Boud, 2013; Maclaren, 2012).
- **Managerialism & Performativity**
Emphasis on measurable outcomes embeds control, not flexibility (Evans, 2013; Raaper, 2017).
- **AI: A Double-Edged Sword**
Potential for feedback and personalisation, yet mostly framed through surveillance and misconduct prevention (Ardito, 2024; Smolansky et al., 2023).

“This literature review sets the stage for the study. First, assessment in HE isn’t neutral — it’s a form of institutional power. Policies shape behaviour and reflect broader systems of control, often aligning more with bureaucratic stability than educational flexibility.

Second, despite widespread support for creative and student-centred assessment methods — from ungrading to phenomenon-based learning — universities are often risk-averse. Innovation gets blocked by policies designed to ensure efficiency and consistency.

Third, managerialism dominates. As Raaper and others point out, neoliberal values of excellence, accountability, and control are embedded in policy language.

Finally, AI brings a new layer. While it could support learning, institutions mostly frame it as a compliance tool — reinforcing, not disrupting, existing norms. Taken together, these insights highlight the discursive and structural barriers assessment policies create, even when pedagogical innovation is a priority.”



“This research grew from my lived experience — trying to implement creative assessment methods and repeatedly running into walls. I started asking: is it really just the policy text? Or is it also how those policies are interpreted and embedded in wider institutional cultures?

These two questions form the basis of the research — examining both the text and the discourse surrounding it.”

Research Framework & Approach

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

- Three lenses of analysis:

1.Textual – the language of assessment policy (modality, tone, vocabulary)

2.Discursive Practice – how policies are produced, circulated, and interpreted

3.Social Practice – links to broader ideologies like managerialism and risk aversion

“I used Fairclough's CDA to dig into how policy language both reflects and reinforces institutional values. This meant looking at the micro level — the words themselves — but also zooming out to understand how these policies function in practice and in wider systems of power.”

Sample & Methodology

Sample:

- Policy documents from **5 diverse UK universities**, selected for institutional variety:
- Pre- and post-92 institutions
- Research-intensive and teaching-focused
- Distance and widening-participation providers

Method:

- Inductive coding aligned to Fairclough's 3D CDA
- Thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2017)

“This wasn’t about naming and shaming. Instead, I selected a range of universities to capture different policy styles and pressures. The dataset includes assessment regulations, guidance documents, and strategy papers. Using NVivo helped me code themes across the documents — which eventually clustered into the four key patterns I’ll show you shortly.”

Researcher Lens



PRACTITIONER +
RESEARCHER = LIVED
INSIGHT



BARRIERS TO
INNOVATIVE
ASSESSMENT



CULTURAL RESISTANCE
TO ALTERNATIVE
MODELS



NAVIGATING POLICY AS
BOTH CONSTRAINT AND
OPPORTUNITY

Disclaimer! This is not a critique!

I approach this study from the dual perspective of practitioner and researcher. My background includes extensive experience trialling innovative assessments—such as portfolios and ungrading—particularly within apprenticeships and work-based learning. However, I’ve consistently come up against challenges rooted not just in implementation, but in the policy environment surrounding assessment.

These experiences prompted me to explore how assessment policy language itself might be shaping what we think is possible. I use Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis to unpick how discourse around standardisation, efficiency, and risk management creates structural constraints.

I want to stress that this research is **not a critique of any individual institution or colleague**. All university names are anonymised. The focus is firmly on how policies across the sector, as texts, reflect broader discursive norms and power structures. The aim is to understand these constraints better—so we can start to rethink them.

Findings

Revealed through Critical Discourse Analysis:

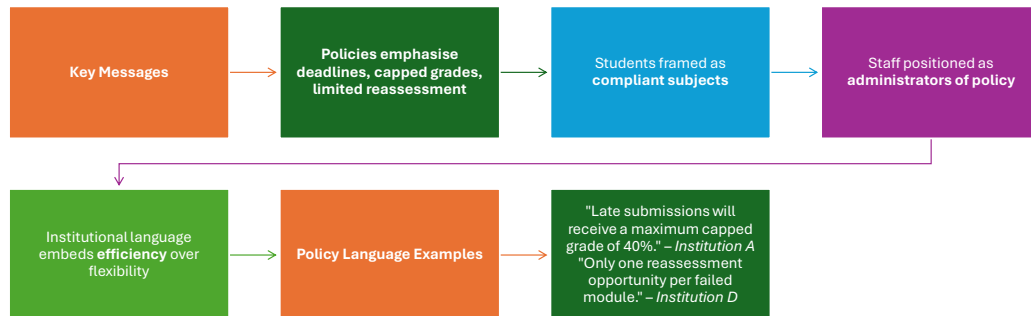
- **Efficiency**
- **Surveillance**
- **Standardisation**
- **Pastoral Power**

“From the documents, four consistent and powerful themes emerged. These aren’t just surface observations — they reflect deeper discursive patterns that shape how assessment is governed and practiced across different institutions. They tell a story of constraint — how innovation gets boxed in by institutional priorities.”

Findings



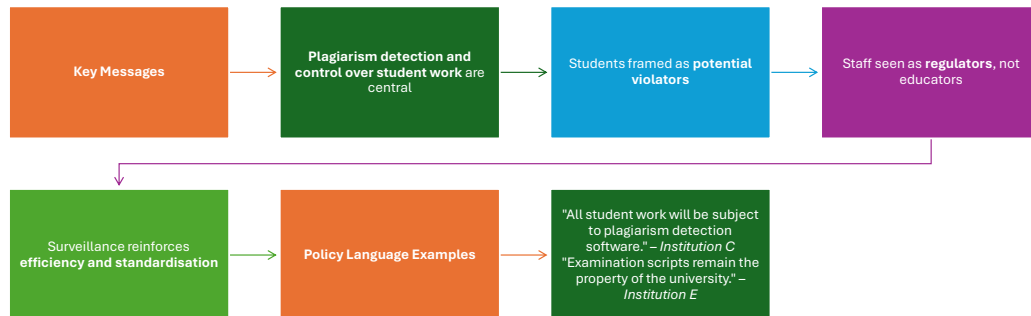
Theme 1: Efficiency



“This first theme — efficiency — runs deep across the institutions. Assessment policies use highly structured language to emphasise deadlines and administrative control, with clear penalties for deviation. For example, Institution A caps late submissions at 40%, while Institution D allows just one reassessment.

From a discourse perspective, this language transforms both students and staff. Students are cast not as curious learners, but as rule-followers. Academics are framed less as educators and more as enforcers of policy. And if you look at the text frequency analysis — words like ‘requirements’ and ‘submission’ dominate. In terms of broader practice, this is part of a much wider discourse — one that values predictability and risk management. But in doing so, it limits scope for creativity, iteration, or failure-as-learning. Efficiency becomes a form of control, pushing assessment toward the administrative and away from the pedagogical.”

Theme 2 - Surveillance

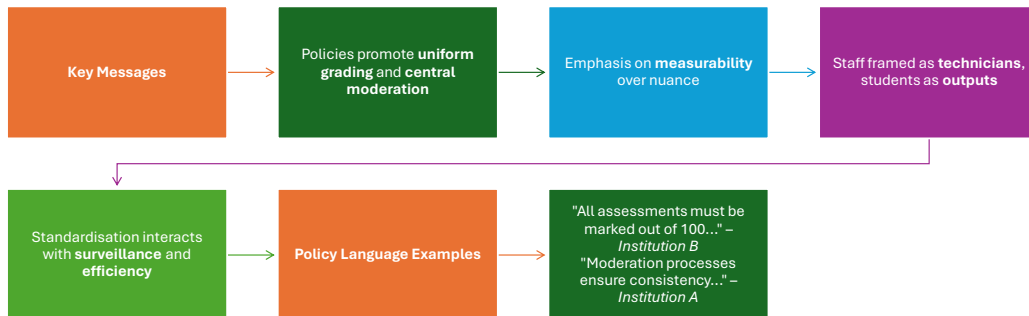


“The second theme is surveillance — not just in the traditional sense, but as a discursive tool of control. Policies consistently highlight technologies and procedures that position student work as needing monitoring. Institution C makes this explicit through its use of plagiarism detection software and integrity panels. Institution E even withholds exam scripts, reinforcing the university's ownership of student output.

The language here is highly regulatory. Words like ‘policy’, ‘regulations’, and ‘board’ dominate, creating a compliance-heavy tone. This discursive environment constructs students not as trusted learners, but as individuals under suspicion — potential rule-breakers. At the same time, it reframes the academic role: educators become enforcers.

From a CDA perspective, this reinforces the institutional logic of risk management and accountability. It aligns tightly with the themes of efficiency and standardisation — creating an ecosystem in which innovation is not only unsupported, but systematically constrained. Surveillance, then, is not just about plagiarism — it’s about maintaining institutional control through discourse.”

Theme 3 – Standardisation and Control

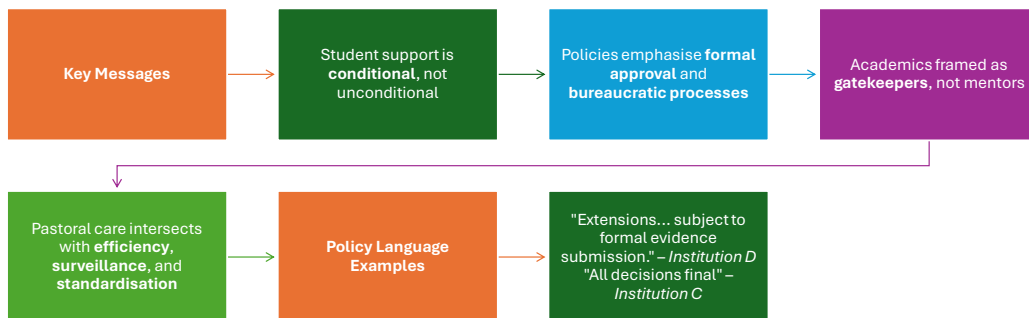


“The third theme is standardisation and control. Here, we see policies enforcing strict grading structures — for example, Institution B’s mandate that all assessments be marked out of 100 with fixed boundaries. Institution A echoes this with centralised moderation designed to ensure examiner conformity. This isn’t just administrative convenience. The language — ‘marks’, ‘credits’, ‘classification’ — shows a deep institutional preference for what’s measurable, comparable, and controlled. But this is problematic, especially in disciplines like the humanities, where interpretive judgement matters. A fixed numerical structure can flatten academic nuance.

Discursively, these policies position students as standardised outputs, reducing learning to performance against rigid metrics. Lecturers are framed as implementers of these systems — more technician than teacher — applying rules rather than exercising pedagogical judgement.

From a CDA perspective, standardisation reinforces the themes of efficiency and surveillance. It enables control — making it easier to monitor, audit, and manage — but it also limits innovation and creativity. It creates a culture where risk is avoided, not embraced, and where autonomy is lost beneath procedural uniformity.”

Theme 4 – Pastoral Power



“Our final theme is *Pastoral Power*. At first glance, this seems like the ‘softer’ side of assessment — policies about extensions, special considerations, and student support. But a deeper analysis shows this support is tightly regulated. For instance, Institution D allows extensions only with formal evidence, and Institution C requires a panel to review and finalise support decisions. There’s a clear emphasis on bureaucracy and oversight. Support becomes conditional — a concession rather than a pedagogical right.

Textually, we see frequent mentions of ‘requirements’, ‘students’, and ‘academic’ — reinforcing the idea that students are governed by procedures, not trusted as autonomous learners. Academics, in turn, are cast as procedural enforcers — not people empowered to make flexible or compassionate decisions based on context.

In CDA terms, this theme connects strongly with the other three. Pastoral care becomes another mechanism for efficiency, surveillance, and standardisation. Requests for flexibility are monitored, audited, and regulated.

At the social level, this contributes to a culture where care is conditional and tightly controlled — which ultimately limits the kind of student-centred innovation we want to see in assessment. It reinforces a compliance mindset rather than a culture of trust and genuine support.”

Interrelationship of Themes

- **Efficiency + Surveillance:**
Submission deadlines + plagiarism checks = compliance-focused culture
- **Standardisation + Efficiency:**
Uniform criteria = streamlined but rigid systems
- **Pastoral Power:**
Appears flexible, but is **conditional** and **procedurally controlled**

Combined Effect

A dominant institutional discourse that prioritises:

- Managerial accountability
- Predictability
- Control over creativity, autonomy, and pedagogical innovation

“These four themes don’t stand in isolation — they’re deeply interconnected and reinforce each other.

Take *Efficiency* and *Surveillance*: policies aimed at streamlining assessment — like tight deadlines and controlled reassessments — are supported by surveillance tools like plagiarism detection software. These mechanisms work together to embed a culture of compliance and monitoring.

Standardisation joins the mix by reinforcing uniform criteria and marking schemes. This makes things easier to manage, yes — but it also restricts innovation. There’s little room to flex or adapt.

Now *Pastoral Power* might seem like the counterpoint — offering flexibility through extensions and support. But on closer inspection, these are still tightly controlled. Policies require formal evidence and are subject to panel review. It’s support, but on institutional terms — still embedded in a culture of compliance. All of this adds up to a dominant discourse — one where accountability, consistency, and control are privileged above all. It becomes very difficult for innovation or flexibility to take root in this environment, because the language of the policy — and the power structures it reflects — doesn’t allow for it. This is exactly what Fairclough helps us to see: not just what policies say, but how the way they say it actually shapes what’s possible in practice.”

Discussion – What the Findings Mean

Assessment Policies as Discursive Mechanisms

- Not neutral - they *construct compliance*
- Fairclough's CDA reveals how *language enforces power structures*

Interwoven Discourses

- **Efficiency + Surveillance** = predictability > pedagogy
- **Standardisation** marginalises disciplinary judgement
- **Pastoral Power** appears supportive, but reinforces control

Constraints on Innovation

- Policies *frame* innovation as risky or exceptional
- AI currently framed as *surveillance*, not *support*

Discursive Change Needed

- Shift policy language to support *creativity, flexibility, and autonomy*
- Embed pedagogy into policy - not just procedure

“In this section, I want to highlight what the findings actually mean in practice. The first takeaway is that assessment policies aren’t just dry admin documents — they’re *discursive tools* that shape how we’re expected to teach and assess. Using Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, I’ve shown how the *language itself* prioritises institutional control over educational creativity.

The four themes — Efficiency, Surveillance, Standardisation, and Pastoral Power — don’t operate independently. They reinforce each other to create a compliance-focused environment. Deadlines and grade capping push efficiency; plagiarism software normalises surveillance; and standardisation erodes academic judgement in favour of uniformity.

Even when policies offer flexibility, like extensions or mitigating circumstances, it’s always conditional — subject to panels, evidence, and institutional gatekeeping. This is what Fairclough would call *pastoral power* — it looks supportive but reinforces the same control structures.

These constraints directly block pedagogical innovation. Ideas like phenomenon-based learning, competency-based assessment, or ungrading — all of which empower students — struggle to gain traction because the policy discourse doesn’t make space for them.

One striking example is AI. Institutions are rushing to regulate it as a threat to

academic integrity, but there's little discourse about its potential to support formative learning. That imbalance mirrors how innovation is treated more broadly — as risky, rather than an opportunity.

So what needs to change?

The answer lies in shifting the discourse itself. We need to reframe assessment policies not as control mechanisms, but as *pedagogical tools* — flexible, creative, and aligned to disciplinary expertise. That means rewriting the policy language, yes — but also embedding educators in the policy process itself.

In doing so, we don't just change what the policies say — we change what kind of education becomes possible."

Conclusions Key Insights



Assessment policies act as
tools of governance



They constrain innovation
through *efficiency, surveillance,*
standardisation, and control



Discourses shape academic
identities and practices, even
without explicit mandates

“As I wrap up, I want to draw attention to what this study ultimately tells us. Assessment policies aren’t just guidelines — they are active mechanisms of institutional control. The discourses they embed—efficiency, surveillance, standardisation—form a web that restricts pedagogical freedom, shaping not only how we assess but how we *think* about assessment. One key contribution of this research is highlighting how these discourses are so deeply embedded that even when the policies don’t explicitly prohibit innovation, they *implicitly discourage it*. The institutional culture they reinforce is one of caution, control, and risk-aversion. So what can we do?”



Reframe	Reframe AI as a formative tool, not surveillance
Decentralise	Decentralise governance - empower disciplinary autonomy
Pilot	Pilot alternatives: ungrading, portfolios, competency-based models
Engage	Engage staff in policy-making
Shift	Shift culture from punishment to trust & learning

First, we need to **reframe how AI is positioned** in policy. Right now it's locked into a surveillance role. Instead, policies should describe AI as a tool for *formative feedback* and *adaptive learning*.

Second, **assessment governance needs decentralising**. Academic faculties need more room to design assessment that aligns with their pedagogical approach, not a one-size-fits-all model.

Third, we need **pilots**. Trial innovative practices like ungrading, portfolios, or competency-based models in specific modules, then share what works.

Fourth, **get staff involved** in writing and revising policy. Academics bring classroom insight that policy teams often miss.

And finally, we need to **shift the culture** of assessment. That means less focus on punishment and detection, more on *trust, learning, and reflection*.

Looking forward, research should go beyond documents and look at *how policies play out in practice*. How do academics and students interpret, resist, or reshape them? And how do small innovations scale—or stall?

This research, in short, argues that real innovation in assessment requires more than good intentions. It requires *changing the story* institutions tell about what assessment is for—and who it should serve.”



The next step for this work is to develop the analysis into a full academic paper for peer-reviewed publication. I'm currently preparing it for submission, focusing on how policy discourse constrains creativity and innovation in assessment across the sector.

Alongside this, I'm drawing these findings directly into my DEE project, which aims to support innovative, authentic assessment through a practical toolkit – now being developed under the name **PrototypeED**.

Rather than jumping straight to solutions, this research has helped me clarify the problem: the language of policy itself is a powerful force. So now, the toolkit will be designed to **work with** those constraints or challenge them where possible. I'm also planning to **pilot some of the ideas**, including alternative policy language and small-scale assessment innovations, and gather feedback from educators on what's feasible in real-world contexts.

Finally, a big part of this work is about **amplifying the practitioner voice**—especially those trying to do things differently in a landscape often defined by risk aversion and standardisation.



PrototypeED – Toolkit for Innovative Teaching

About



29.05	Lego Serious Play Conference Poster
28.05	Teach Different: Cold Calling and Inclusive Classrooms
22.04	Design Sprints in HE: A Practical Guide for Creative Learning
03.04	Why We Need to Rethink Assessment in HE: Innovation and Creativity Toolkit
28.08	Enhancing entrepreneurial competencies through 'Innovation and Creativity in Teaching and Learning'
23.07	Impact intrapreneurship – leveraging the power of social innovation
10.07	Active Learning Spectrum

Design Sprint

A Design Sprint is a structured, time-bound process that empowers students to solve real problems collaboratively, creatively and quickly. Originally conceived by Google Ventures (Krug et al., 2016), and refined at MIT's Human-Centred Design and the Design Council's Double Diamond, this approach promotes empathy, iteration, rapid prototyping and testing.

Competency Development

- **Creativity**: Generate new ideas to respond to challenges
- **Working with Others**: Collaborate and co-create with diverse perspectives
- **Planning and Management**: Prioritise, organise and take decisions
- **Taking the Initiative**: Actively engage in the problem-solving process
- **Learning Through Experience**: Reflect and adapt based on feedback
- **Dealing with Uncertainty**: Navigate complex problems and unknown outcomes

Notes

- **SDG 3** – Good Health and Well-being
- **SDG 4** – Quality Education
- **SDG 8** – Decent Work and Economic Growth
- **SDG 9** – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

This guide adapts the Design Sprint process for higher education, focusing on inclusive, action-based learning that develops graduate attributes such as creativity, problem solving, and risk-taking.



1 Understand and Emphasise

The sprint begins by helping students step into the shoes of the user. They explore the brief, surface the issues, and use tools such as Empathy Mapping, the Future, and Affinity Clustering to identify root causes. The stage with the 'Discover' phase of the Double Diamond and the first stage of design thinking. Initial work is done jointly to ensure all voices are heard before sharing ideas. Students learn to analyse problems deeply before jumping to solutions, generating their thinking in real-world user needs.

Tip: Create fictional personas or user profiles to spark discussion.



2 Define and Frame

In this stage, students convert insights into 'How might we?' problem questions. These open-ended prompts focus creative thinking on real problems. Students generate several ideas and use dot voting to prioritise the most compelling. This phase transitions from exploration to action, narrowing the problem space without losing creativity. It draws on the 'Define' phase of the Double Diamond and is central to the Google Sprint model. A well-crafted H2H guides the rest of the sprint and ensures teams work with focus and purpose.

Tip: Encourage students to combine, merge, or refine ideas after group discussion.



3 Ideas and Create

This is the creative heart of the sprint. Using the 'How might we?' method, students develop eight ideas in eight minutes to encourage rapid thinking. Teams then share, group, and merge ideas, voting on those with the strongest potential. This process encourages divergent/convergent thinking, key to innovation. Students learn that quantity leads to quality and that even wild ideas can spark great solutions. The stage builds confidence in creative problem solving and supports risk-taking in a low-pressure environment.

Tip: Remind students there are no bad ideas – ideas evolve through collaboration.



4 Prototype and Refine

Students build a quick, low-fidelity version of their solution. This could be a paper model, storyboard, diagram, or short role-play. The goal is not perfect but clarity, enough to gather feedback. Based on IDEO's 'Build to Think' philosophy and Google's Sprint model, this phase develops adaptability and experimentation. Students learn that prototyping is a form of thinking, not just producing. The process helps develop a single concept and progress students to accept feedback and iterate.

Tip: Use a timer to emphasise speed over perfection, enough to gather enough.



5 Test and Pitch

Students share their prototype with a peer group, a panel, or the wider class, aiming to gather feedback rather than approval. This mimics user testing in design practice. Reflection follows; students note what worked, what didn't, and what they would change. They can also create a LinkedIn post or reflection log to evidence learning and showcase their ideas. This stage supports contribution, confidence and reflective thinking while linking to enterprise and employability outcomes.

Tip: Use a structured peer feedback form to guide discussion and keep it constructive.

Adobe Playbook

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