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Can design thinking in executive education build entrepreneurial leaders faster?

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Executive summary

Leaders are expected to navigate innovation, sustainability and rapid change, yet many organisations still reward linear plans and polished “final answers”. Evidence from an Executive MBA at Newcastle University Business School suggests that using design thinking as a pedagogical approach can shift experienced managers’ mindsets and practices (Hatt, Davidson & Carrion-Weiss, 2023).

Learners took part in intensive, client-facing Rapid Design Interventions (the term “Rapid Design Interventions” includes “Design Sprints”) and reported greater empathy, creative confidence and comfort with ambiguity. Client organisations reported actionable recommendations and follow-on benefits.

The implication for enterprise policy and practice is straightforward: encourage executive learning that privileges experimentation, collaboration and implementation support, not only classroom content.

Why current leadership support often fails to make the practice shift

SME and innovation-support programmes often transfer tools, but struggle to change how leaders diagnose problems, involve stakeholders and test ideas.

For senior practitioners, the capability gap is frequently about reframing “messy” challenges, challenging assumptions and mobilising action under uncertainty which are core entrepreneurial leadership behaviours. This Insight shows what programme design features can enable that shift.

Setting and method: Rapid Design Interventions with live clients

Our research examined two Executive MBA modules (“Innovation & Enterprise” and “Sustainability”) delivered through blended learning and practice-based assessment. Design Thinking (Brown, 2008) frameworks were introduced, then enacted through a three-day Rapid Design Intervention (RDI) with external client organisations, according to the following structure (Fig 1).

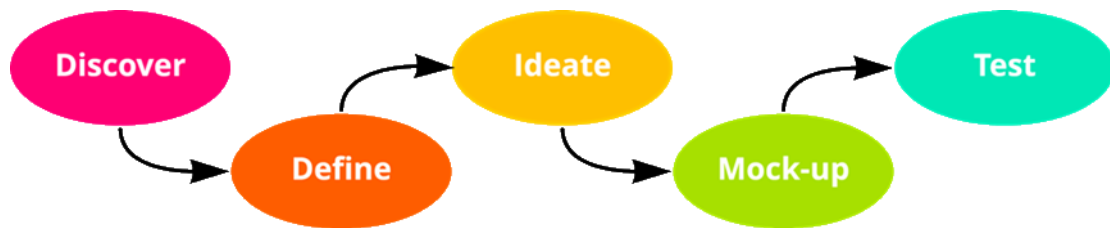


Figure 1 The Design Thinking Model used in the pedagogical context

Teams discovered and reframed the brief, ideated, prototyped and tested concepts, and presented recommendations back to clients. Evidence was drawn from client feedback, observation, and learners’ reflective assessments during built-in “unpacking” sessions. Client projects were selected to create civic value and align with Sustainable Development Goals, including support for organisations with limited access to consultancy resource.

Discussion of key findings

1. Productive discomfort unlocked learning.

Learners initially found the “rough and ready” prototyping uncomfortable because it conflicted with workplace norms of producing complete, defensible solutions. That discomfort surfaced hidden assumptions about rigour and created space to practise entrepreneurial experimentation.

2. Reflection and psychological safety mattered as much as the RDI.

Structured peer reflection helped teams build trust, recognise growth and accept the role of “novice learner”. This social infrastructure reduced fear of judgement and increased willingness to test ideas before they felt “ready”.

3. External collaboration generated tangible value.

Clients reported recommendations being taken forward after the RDI, including changes to market-facing activity and new connections. In one case, a learner was later appointed as a Non-Executive Director on a Client Board. Learners' module assessments showed clearer articulation of innovation and sustainability issues, and increased confidence to lead change inside their organisations.

4. Transfer needs scaffolding.

The RDI process is both simplified and constrained by academic timetables, while organisational application is iterative and political. Enabling learners to see how design thinking might be embedded in organisational systems (Fig. 2) helped them adapt the approach beyond the classroom.

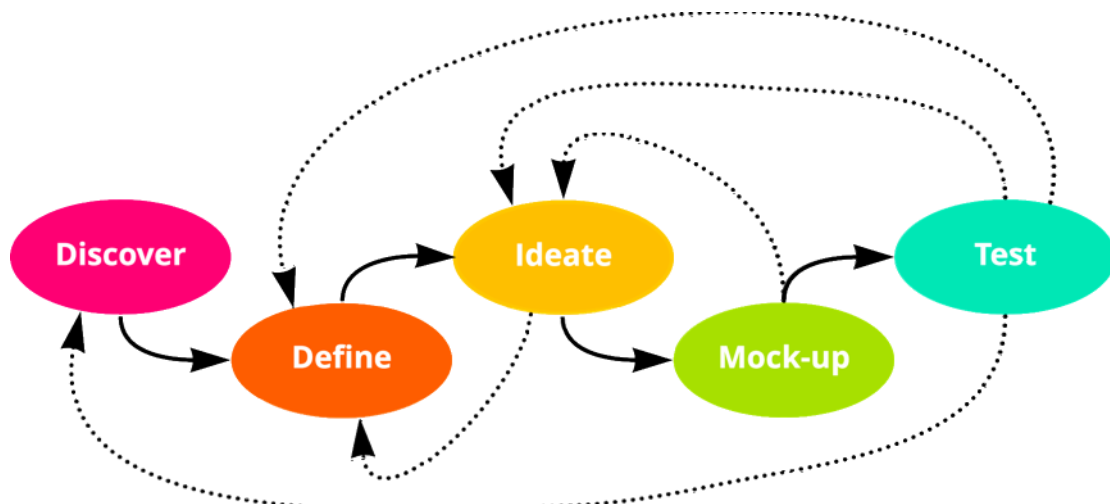


Figure 2 Design Thinking embedded within organisations

Caveats

Design Thinking is an umbrella term and can be used in reductionist ways. Our evidence supports using it as a structured set of practices (empathy, reframing, prototyping, reflection) rather than promising that non-designers will achieve “designerly mastery” (Cross, 2023). It should be treated as one capability in a wider toolkit for tackling systemic challenges, not a universal cure-all.

Policy and practice recommendations

For policymakers funding entrepreneurship, leadership and innovation support

- Fund learning-through-doing formats that combine real client briefs, rapid prototyping and facilitated reflection (not just workshops).



- Build in a light post-sprint implementation phase (e.g., 6–12 weeks) so teams can test recommendations, engage stakeholders and evidence outcomes.
- Incentivise university–civic partnerships that match executive learners with resource-constrained organisations (including third sector) on innovation and sustainability challenges.

For executive education and business support providers

- Legitimate iteration: make “unfinished” prototypes acceptable deliverables and explicitly discuss the contrast with workplace expectations.
- Use trained design facilitators (or partner with design consultancies) to manage pace, inclusion and stakeholder dynamics.
- Evaluate programmes on capability shifts (empathy, reframing, experimentation, learning agility) as well as outputs.

For employers

- Protect time and permission to experiment (pilot budgets, rapid review cycles, senior sponsorship), otherwise learning decays when participants return to risk-averse routines.

References

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