The Programme Level Approach (PLA) is the embodiment of the core aims of the University of Sheffield's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2016-21. It presents an opportunity to co-develop a way of working that will support delivery of high quality teaching that inspires and engages students; that prepares them for the world beyond the University; and ensures that we are maximising the benefits of innovative approaches to teaching and the effective use of technologies.

The purpose of this briefing is to provide departments with an overview of the drivers behind PLA and to outline expectations for the academic year 2017-18.

What is a Programme Level Approach?
PLA takes a holistic view of the programme that the student experiences, placing greater emphasis on the coherence of the programme rather than the modules that it comprises. It promotes staff and student understanding of the whole programme, including:

- The academic knowledge, skills and competencies that students develop at each stage as they progress through a programme of study towards being assured and confident graduates.
- How organisational and management arrangements underpinning delivery of a programme inform the student experience (e.g. the balance of assessment across the full academic year).
- How the programme helps students achieve the set of values and skills that are intended for all students as described in The Sheffield Graduate Attributes (SGA).

Developing this approach is a longitudinal piece of work with wide reaching implications, not least with a growing expectation that academic and professional colleagues orientate themselves as part of one or more programme teams.

What is a programme?
A programme is the course that a student applies to study. In simplest terms it is ‘their course’; recognising that in certain instances, and for expediency, a department may wish to group some courses together for consideration under PLA. This would apply where the core academic components are common, but where students are able to follow different routes, for example taking a year in industry. Similarly, it may be applied where the same course is offered via different modes of study (full-time, part-time, DL). The test in both cases is that students on these courses would reasonably recognise themselves as a cohort.

Why are we doing it?
The PLA seeks to address recognised issues with compartmentalisation of learning. In moving away from a module level view of teaching the intention is to help improve programme coherence and efficiency, providing students with a clearer understanding of their programme of study, the expectations upon them as they progress through it, and the options and opportunities available. PLA provides the opportunity to:
• Develop an ethos among academic, professional and technical colleagues of working in a team on ‘our programme’ rather than ‘my module.’
• Identify and address areas of duplication, gaps, anomalies and/or inefficiencies in the way that programmes are delivered to, and experienced by, students.
• Improve student engagement in all aspects of programme design and delivery.
• Accelerate progress in priority areas of learning and teaching including:
  ○ streamlining and reducing assessment to the benefit of both staff and students
  ○ embedding Sheffield Graduate Attributes within the curriculum, and maximising the future success of our graduates
  ○ tackling student stress and student mental health issues
  ○ addressing historical areas of weakness in NSS, including assessment and feedback, organisation and management and student voice
  ○ maximising the reach and benefits of Technology Enhanced Learning
  ○ articulating the employability offer to students and how this is delivered.
• Inform and improve the quality and effectiveness of professional and technical processes, systems and services that collectively support the University’s learning and teaching activities.

Critically, PLA is not a one off exercise, but an evolution in the way the University designs, develops, delivers and reflects upon its academic offer. Consequently, the understanding, benefits and impacts anticipated from PLA will continue to evolve through and beyond the current learning and teaching strategy period.

High level expectations for departments in terms of delivery of PLA are provided below. In achieving these, departments are also asked to ensure that the rationale for and the benefits of the PLA are understood by colleagues; that there is a clear focus on building teams to support a PLA rather than relying on one or two individuals; and that the deadlines for completing the actions are met.

Why now?
There is a need for the University to reflect on the range of programmes that it offers; to consider where and how the student experience can be enhanced; and to ensure that a level of coherence and, where appropriate, alignment exists across our academic offer. Externally, Brexit, the creation of the Office for Students, challenges to the sustainability of the funding model for Higher Education, and the demographic dip in terms of the number of 18 years olds entering Higher Education, all mean that it is more critical than ever that the University remains competitive in the current market.

If we are to continue to recruit high quality students and and to retain our reputation as a leading university internationally then we need to ensure that our academic offer, and the way in which we deliver this, is constantly improving. This cannot be achieved at a modular level alone. Whilst as an institution we have rightly resisted the temptation to chase leagues tables, we do need to ensure that the quality and success of what we do is recognised via the TEF, NSS, Graduate Outcomes, etc as these measures do, and will increasingly, impact on our reputation and income.

What do departments need to do during 2017/18?
On 24 October 2017, UEB agreed a roadmap for PLA, setting out the high level expectations on Faculties, Departments and Professional Services for 2017-18. For departments these are that:

1. Departments will appoint a Programme Level Leader to provide the coordinating lead for all work under the PLA and to help develop a team-based approach in their own department.
A draft set of core responsibilities is currently being developed, for agreement with faculties, for those individuals within departments who will take responsibility for overseeing the move to a Programme Level Approach. These individuals will work with colleagues in their department and faculty as well as with Programmes Level Leaders across the wider University, to ensure that PLA is progressed and its benefits maximised within their department.

Departments may wish to begin to consider how Programme Level Leaders will operate within local management structures to best effect, ahead of role responsibilities being finalised.

2. **Departments will produce a plan of how they will engage students in the PLA to understand how the academic content, and the organisational and management arrangements for delivery of programmes, affect the student experience, along with when this will happen.**

Departments are asked to reflect on how students will actively engage in the adoption of PLA locally and to plan what needs to be in place to support this. A programme of work to review approaches to student engagement is due to report shortly and further guidance will be made available to departments on completion.

As part of this process departments are asked to:

- Recognise the importance of fostering students' active and committed engagement with learning when planning the development or enhancement of curricula or reflecting on the structures that underpin the delivery of teaching and assessment.
- Take steps to ensure that current arrangements, principally Student-Staff Committees, Student Evaluation of Modules/Programmes, etc are working effectively and being used, along with broader dialogue with students, to inform planning and decision-making.
- Consider how data (NSS, module evaluations, Graduate Outcomes, etc) can be used to identify and inform priority areas for improvement and how they engage the student community to deepen the understanding of these issues.
- Consider new ways of engaging with students, for instance involving them in workshops to discuss subject specific graduate attributes, how assessment is organised over the course of an academic year, etc.

3. **Departments will undertake to map programme learning outcomes against the Sheffield Graduate Attributes.**

Departments are asked to assure themselves that, through embedded activities in the curriculum, their graduates have the opportunity to develop against the Sheffield Graduate Attributes and, where appropriate, to deepen these through access to extracurricular activities. Departments are asked to map SGAs against their programmes in a way that clearly demonstrates how each attribute is developed as a student progresses through their studies and how this can be traced back to relevant modules and/or activities.

SGAs are an important component in designing programmes and are essential in helping to shape programme level outcomes. They help to equip graduates to be successful both in graduate level jobs and/or postgraduate education by broadening skills and values alongside mastery of individual subject areas. Students are expected to develop these skills and values over the course of their programme,

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1 It will be at the discretion of faculties/departments to determine whether these responsibilities are managed by staff currently in learning and teaching leadership roles, or whether a separate role is created to facilitate this process.
and opportunities to acquire these should be integrated within all programmes. Further information in relation to incorporating the Sheffield Graduate Attributes into programmes can be found here.

Departments can agree locally how they want to undertake this mapping, as it is recognised that they will want to manage this process in a way that works best for them in terms of engaging colleagues and embedding the ethos of a PLA approach. This will inevitably vary by department. “Starting with the end in mind” is an example of how a University in Australia approached this and may provide useful background reading.

The purpose of this exercise is to identify potential gaps, duplication, or opportunities for improvement and will inform the PLA transition process from 2018. The mapping exercise should be an inclusive exercise allowing those staff teaching across a programme to contribute as a programme team, particularly in areas where this has not been the usual way of working.

It is acknowledged that the above are minimum expectations and that some departments, and specifically some of those that have been involved in PLA pilots over the past year, are ready to move towards implementation. Academic Programmes and Student Engagement (APSE)\(^2\) will continue to work with these departments, as well as departments outside the pilot to support implementation and to understand better the medium and longer term service requirements needed to help departments implement and maintain a PLA.

Indicative timelines towards 2021

During 2018-19 session, departments will work, with support from APSE, to transition at least one core programme per department to PLA, recognising that in some areas it may be more practical to transition groups of programmes.

By 2021 all taught programmes within the University’s portfolio will be operating PLA.

Support and Guidance

- Faculty Learning and Teaching Development Managers and Faculty Directors of Learning and Teaching (see below) can be contacted to provide support to departments in relation to helping with the 2017/18 milestones for PLA. They will also be able to provide examples of how other departments, including the pilot departments, have approached PLA.

Learning & Teaching Development Managers:

- Arts and Humanities - Andrea Bath a.j.bath@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 21365
- Engineering - Richard Ward R.B.Ward@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 21358
- Medicine, Dentistry and Health - Marie Evans m.evans@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 21746
- Science - Claire Allam c.allam@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 20407
- Social Sciences - Sarah Hague S.L.Hague@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 21352

\(^2\) APSE is the new department encompassing areas of the former Student Services, including Learning and Teaching Services, Careers, 301, Sheffield Enterprise, Technology Enhanced Learning, and the Department of Lifelong Learning.
Faculty Directors of Learning & Teaching

Arts and Humanities - Robert Johnston R.Johnston@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 22941
Engineering - Rachel Horn R.Horn@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 25792
Medicine, Dentistry and Health - Adrian Jowett m.evans@sheffield.ac.uk, 271 7923
Science - Alistair Warren M.A.Warren@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 24656
Social Sciences - Jackie Marsh J.A.Marsh@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 28166

Extra Faculty Provision

Dept of Lifelong Learning - Dr Willy Kitchen W.Kitchen@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 27021
English Language Teaching Centre - Richard Simpson R.A.Simpson@sheffield.ac.uk, ext. 21790

- Guidance relating to improving student engagement can be found at:

  Guidance on student engagement in learning and teaching

- Guidance on mapping Sheffield Graduate Attributes can be found at:

  Guidance on incorporating the Sheffield Graduate Attributes within your programme.