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Proposal

Title: A Cultural Shift in Programme Design? A case study at the institutional level from the UK

Abstract:
In the summer of 2017, the University of Sheffield embarked on a major reform of its approach to learning and teaching by instigating the Programme Level Approach (PLA) project. The PLA aims to situate the student at the heart of the process of programme design, delivery and assessment, with an emphasis on student outcomes, and team-working amongst departmental academic staff, and has significant implications for student assessment diets and staff workload. It is not intended to be a one off tick-box exercise but rather aims to initiate a sustained shift in learning and teaching institutional culture. Although PLA is still at an early stage of implementation, it has already begun to generate fresh and exciting discussions around what constitutes a programme, how best to assess student learning and also to create different modes of engaging students in their learning.

Key words: graduate attributes, metrics, workload, assessment

1. Introduction

Universities share a common goal in seeking ways to enhance the design, delivery and assessment of their academic programmes. There is, however, less homogeneity in the routes taken to achieve these outcomes, with approaches ranging from highly centralised and mandatory programmes to dictate change, through to models of more dispersed, local innovation with an aim of spreading good practice organically. Each approach will have its merits and will reflect the context in which it is instigated as well as the nature of the drivers for change. Success too will be conditional on a range of factors. It is against this generic background of enhancement that the University of Sheffield has recently undertaken a new approach to the development of its programmes called the Programme Level Approach (PLA). The aim of PLA is to reflect local need while also taking cognisance of the wider external environment. This paper explores the story so far of the inception and implementation of the PLA, and offers some early insights of what has worked well and what needs further refining.

The PLA was formulated in 2016 and has since been central to enhancement activity within the University. Essentially it involves taking a holistic view of a programme from the students' rather than the academics' perspective, in the spirit of but nothe same as Fung's Connected Curriculum (Fung, 2017). PLA is designed to put students at the heart of enhancement by beginning with a simple question: when students graduate from a given programme, what attributes, skills and knowledge should they have acquired? In other words, PLA begins by considering the range of intended outcomes and from there seeks to design the curriculum, teaching and the assessment in such a way that opportunities to acquire these attributes and abilities are woven throughout the programme.

In its design, PLA is a centrally directed initiative but one which is then locally owned, shaped and delivered by and within departments and disciplines. PLA focusses on cultural change across both academic departments and professional services, as well as having an impact on processes in the approval, monitoring and quality assurance of programmes. There are broader aims arising too which go beyond the apparently straightforward desire for enhancement: for instance, it provides scope to deal with long-standing issues in student experience such as assessment and feedback; addresses staff workload and competing claims on their time; is part of the wider University drive to support student well-being; and helps with challenges around student recruitment. Clearly this is an ambitious and wide-reaching initiative, but in creating a culture which takes an holistic view of degree programmes, it helps deal with many of the pressures arising from external drivers as well as helping achieve internal ambitions. This paper reflects on the learning and experiences so far.

2. The Context for PLA

The University of Sheffield is a research-intensive institution with around 27,000 students across undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research programmes. Its programmes of study are research informed and cross the arts, sciences, engineering, social sciences and medicine. Its mission is "to educate ourselves and others and to learn through doing so, thereby improving the world" with guiding principles including excellence, agility, resilience and ambition (University of Sheffield, 2015). The University has a global focus for both research and teaching and the drivers for change come from both domestic and international sources.

Global drivers centre on competition for student recruitment while at the same time also seeking collaborations across research projects. Nationally, the current agenda for higher education is a highly fluid and challenging one. Questions around funding, quality of education and ultimately, 'value for money' are key elements in the general UK political discourse (Education Committee, 2018) and when coupled with demographic change, uncertainty over Brexit, and a new regulatory environment, there is a perfect storm of change influencing the ways in which universities behave and respond.

However, what is crucial in such times is to draw on fundamental aspects of universities' purpose and values. A discourse has arisen in which students are portrayed as consumers with the benefits flowing from their studies being purely private in nature. A key driver for this has been the on-going debate over 'who pays' for higher education (UK Government, 2018): the state or the student. Since 2012 there has been a far more explicit belief that students "pay" through taking out government loans to cover fees and living expenses, with repayment on graduation once earnings reach defined thresholds. The associated debt levels for students have not been popular and have reinforced a discourse centring on questions of value for money and around what is a degree for?

The shift to student loans and higher fees has brought with it an increased use of metrics to measure institutions' "performance" and much greater scrutiny on how government money (through student loans) is being used. This has created a regulatory environment operated by the Office for Students that is predicated on measuring teaching excellence through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and this and other interventions require a change in the way universities behave and operate.

At one level, it can be argued that the new regulatory environment requires universities to adopt more market-oriented approaches and more instrumental responses. However, our argument here is that such responses alone can erase key aspects of universities' purpose: the contribution which the provision of degree-level education makes to civil society and the public good. These two facets may appear to be at odds with each other. Can both these apparently divergent ends be met? Our contention at Sheffield is that they can, and that PLA is a means to this end.

3. Developing the PLA

The internal context for the development of the PLA is shaped by the University's strategic direction for learning and teaching and also by a desire to deal with a number of identified problems, some long-standing, others more recent. The combination of these factors provides the backdrop for the institutional change that PLA brings, alongside a clear link to the imperatives arising in the external environment.

Taking the strategic lead first, the PLA was initiated during the development of the Learning and Teaching Strategy 2016-21 (University of Sheffield, 2016); the Strategy's three thematic strands were underpinned by *inter alia* two key principles: student engagement and taking a programme level view of activity. The Strategy itself was the product of a wide-ranging consultation process with academics, students, employers and alumni which generated a focus on enhancement activities. Thus there was a significant sense of the Strategy's aims and approaches, including these principles, having been co-produced and co-owned. The Strategy's definition of excellence emerged from a debate held at Senate, and was informed by views from different groups of colleagues: students, teaching professors, and key academic and professional service leads for teaching. This process also created a sense of shared ownership and this provided a foundation for enhancement work.

The Strategy is the framework from which the PLA developed and the latter has become a key part of delivering the former. The Strategy consultation process highlighted academic colleagues concerns about a proliferation of learning and teaching initiatives and unmanageable workloads as a result. Furthermore, long-standing challenges in the National Student Survey (NSS) around assessment and feedback had generated huge effort and intense scrutiny of data but with little reward in terms of altering student experience in those critical areas. Furthermore, there are growing concerns around student mental health and well-being, often related to the burden of assessment and its impact at different times in the year. Plus, the University is in a highly competitive student recruitment market with a declining 18 year old population. Staff workload too is a key focus especially when time needs to be created to support an excellence agenda in research too. Thus, the challenges are considerable.

In calling for a programme level approach, the L&T Strategy provides an opportunity for not only dealing with pressing internal challenges but also the mandatory nature of some of the external drivers. In focussing on and starting to achieve excellence at the programme level, the metrics associated with the measurement of the teaching at universities (NSS, employability and ultimately the TEF) are expected to follow. By having a clear focus on excellence and by delivering well-designed programmes, our engagement with the metrics measuring excellence should be less onerous and,

most critically, an outcome of activity rather than a target in themselves - an approach in line with the ethos at Sheffield.

We expect PLA's benefits will include more time for academic colleagues to engage more with students or to shape their research agenda; much greater clarity for prospective students about the expected outcomes of programmes with the aim of improving recruitment; better design of, and feedback from, assessment for current students; and for both staff and students an improvement in well-being and mental health.

A crucial part of developing PLA was to ensure at inception that there was an understanding of, and subsequent endorsement of its aims and ambition. Equally, there needed to be clear accountability and ownership so that the institution gained confidence in it. To that end, the Vice-President for Education (VPE) tabled a proposal outlining PLA and a roadmap for its implementation which was discussed and endorsed by the University Executive Board (UEB). By gaining UEB endorsement and with a clear sponsor providing leadership, the foundations had been established.

Once agreed, the next steps were to ensure that there was clear and consistent communication with the key groups across the University. To begin with, the aim was simply to start 'socialising' the idea of PLA by speaking with colleagues about it and the potential benefits. Discussions were also held in University-wide learning and teaching forums, to create a sense of collective endeavour around a common purpose and also allow for some refining of detail. Finally the VPE visited all 43 University departments to outline PLA and the benefits it would bring, and a video was created to disseminate widely the overall aims of PLA in a short and easily digestible fashion.

The conversation with departments was informed by outcomes from five PLA pilots, run in departments across specific programmes. These departments all took quite different approaches and arrived at different outcomes as a result, with some making much greater headway than others. However, their various experiences were useful in highlighting that the PLA was not a single process but a way of thinking, thus capturing PLA's characteristic as an agent for cultural change rather than a new routine process. In many respects, the variety of pilot approaches helped allay some fears concerning the workload entailed in moving to PLA and the timeframe for achieving success.

4. Implementation of the PLA

The roadmap for the PLA was designed specifically to be ambitious in its overall aim but cautious in its inception, to ensure that there was understanding of the concepts and principles before beginning activity. A key document for shaping that activity, and for clarifying the principles of the PLA was the University's list of the 'Sheffield Graduate Attributes: a set of skills, characteristics and attitudes which all students should have had the opportunity to develop during their time at Sheffield. The attributes are arranged in four sections: Discipline-based knowledge; Application of knowledge; Scholarship; and Development. Examples of attributes include being a critical analytical thinker; digital literacy; and able to work in teams. Importantly they also detail several characteristics which align with the notion of education as a civic activity and a public good. Examples include: "Confident in considering issues

within local, national and international contexts"; "equipped to work in diverse cultural settings"; and "Experienced at working in partnership with others, including communities and external partners".

Thus, a clear set of actions were drawn up and which all departments were tasked to complete during 2017-18. These were as follows:

1. Map the Sheffield Graduate Attributes in a programme in order to understand if there are opportunities provided for students to acquire the attributes.

2. Establish how students would be engaged in the process of taking PLA forward

3. Identify a member of staff to take the PLA lead role for each department

Alongside this, there was a reinvigoration of a policy of portfolio review at programme and modular level, which Senate agreed in 2011, the thinking being that there was no point spending time reworking programmes which were failing to attract students.

For the 2018-19 academic session there are three priorities for all departments:

1. Identify and map the assessment menu diet and design across all programmes

2. Implement plans for student engagement through involving students in discussions about assessment and feedback

3. Introducing a consistent student evaluation process at the programme level

The rationale behind these three areas is a concern to enhance key aspects of student experience - and increasing students' involvement in this process. As already noted, assessment, and particularly feedback, has been a focal point of much academic endeavour in attempts to help improve student outcomes as evidenced through the NSS. Our hypothesis is that prior efforts to improve these facets of student experience have often been focussed at a modular level and that any changes made have not been aligned with shifts elsewhere in the programme, with insufficient attention being paid to the overall shape of assessment throughout the degree.

5. What have we learned so far?

As with all large-scale projects, and especially those that focus on cultural change, there are many lessons to be learned in the early stages which can help inform and shape later developments. This has been the case with PLA. The positive aspects can be summarised as follows:

- The idea of PLA gained traction quickly. It is apparent that the process of communicating widely and engaging colleagues helped to create an understanding of PLA and a general acceptance that its underpinning principles and the scope of its ambition were correct. There is still some way to go to ensure all colleagues are familiar with PLA and its associated activities; however the first year has shown that many are already aware of it.

- The concept of PLA is now being used in forums such as the regular Heads of Department-UEB away days. Moreover, PLA is being referenced as a vehicle to address a number of diverse challenges. This integration into thinking of the ways in which PLA can support other institution-wide activities such as the Student Lifecycle Project (in essence, a student record management system) is very encouraging.

- PLA is being used to address long-standing issues. The opportunity to initiate meaningful change in relation to the problems of student experience, especially around assessment and feedback, has been welcomed and has generated much discussion in departments concerning how to best utilize the opportunities offered by PLA.

- Student engagement: the Students' Union has been very supportive of the PLA, primarily because the potential benefits for students are clear but also because the Union was a key partner in the development of PLA and its implementation. The specific focus on student engagement at the departmental level has also spawned a project on student representation more widely across the University.

There are, of course, some areas where progress has been slower, or where barriers have arisen. These include:

- Some frustration that large changes in programmes are difficult to enact. Some departments have recognized that there are potentially significant changes for assessment design, for example, but are unable as yet to initiate these because the University's regulations and systems are not yet able to cope with such innovation. This could lead to disengagement at an early stage which obviously would be harmful to the project.

- Questions have arisen about how to measure "success". Some colleagues have asked how will they know when they have "done" PLA? This is indicative of the mind-shift we need to continue to nurture as clearly PLA is more about cultural change and ways of thinking rather than a defined process with a defined outcome and endpoint.

- The student body is continually changing and renewing; thus, ensuring we keep students on board will undoubtedly be a challenge.

In general, the learning so far can be summarised as follows:

- It is important to clearly identify the area of focus ("the problem") and ensure that there is local ownership of a globally agreed approach ("what's in it for me").
- A sense of ownership of the agenda should be encouraged but it's also important to be mindful of the delicate balance between central direction and local ownership of action.
- Student involvement and engagement has to be embedded from the outset with this refreshed and elicited on an on-going basis.

- Communication is critical: simple messages, clearly expressed and regularly given are important; as is sharing as much as possible and as often as possible with colleagues and students. Never assume that the message has 'got through'.
- Ensure the benefits of change are understood, credible and measurable where appropriate
- Clearly identify actions and measures of success
- Be ready to praise often and fully!

6. Summary and Conclusions

The PLA is a significant step change in the way the University of Sheffield thinks about and implements its learning and teaching activities. It is intended to be the vehicle to support and deliver cultural change across all programmes in the University with a focus on enhancing the student experience, dealing with staff workload and creating exciting new offers to potential students. It is in its infancy and while there is a long way to go before success is achieved, the fact that the idea of PLA is now in common usage, has clear ownership and accountability across the departments and University, and is a process that draws both staff and students into thinking anew about how programmes are designed, taught and assessed, represents a very positive set of outcomes so far. All of this presents us with a good foundation for a future deepening of the approach, but there is still a significant distance to travel.

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