

Initial submission from UCU to the Independent Review of Professionalism in the Further Education (FE) and Skills Sector

UCU has 120,000 members across post-16 education, including 50,000 who work in parts of the sector currently covered by the Institute for Learning (IfL). We very much welcome the opportunity to give the review our early views, and will be happy to provide a further, more detailed submission in due course.

We have recently concluded a survey of members' views on CPD in general and IfL in particular and this submission includes details of that where appropriate.

Our current position

Our members fundamentally oppose the current model of the IfL and are instituting a widely observed boycott of its fees following a legal ballot. Our opposition is based upon:

- the mandatory nature of IfL membership
- the charging of a fee for membership
- the nature and quality of service provided by the IfL in its current format
- the undemocratic way in which the IfL is run.

IfL, in our view, has little or no credibility within the sector either with staff or employers. We respectfully suggest to the Review that fundamental reform in each of the four key areas set out above is required and that without it, IfL or a successor body will continue to fail.

In this submission, we will address each of these areas and finally set out what we hope the review finds are constructive views on the future.

The mandatory nature of IfL membership

Over the next year teaching staff in further education will become the only educators in England – whether in schools, colleges, adult institutes or universities – who are required to hold mandatory membership of a professional body.

In schools, the General Teaching Council (GTC) is to be abolished shortly. In making this announcement in June 2010, Michael Gove stated that 'the quango took more than £36 each year from every teacher and gave them hardly anything back'.

In higher education, the HE Academy is a voluntary organisation funded by the sector itself through grants whose mission is to 'use our expertise and resources to support the higher education community in order to enhance the quality and impact of learning and teaching'.

In order to inform this submission, UCU has surveyed 1,100 members eligible for IfL membership over the last two weeks. When we asked staff whether they thought 'membership of the IfL or any professional association should be mandatory' just 15.5% said yes, with 84.5% saying no.

The charging of a fee for membership

As we have noted, teaching staff in schools and universities are not asked to pay to belong to their general professional bodies. For UCU members, there are two issues with the fee. The first is an objection to paying any kind of fee, especially when similar professionals are not required to do so. The second relates to what is perceived as extremely poor value for money.

Where staff object to a fee on principle, this causes real problems in practice.

We note, for example that IfL currently claim that 80,000 people have paid their membership subscription. This means that 100,000 former FE and skills sector staff have chosen not to, many of those doing so because of the UCU organised boycott.

However, this reluctance to pay a forced fee is not new, nor should it have been unforeseen. In 2010, when the fee was first proposed, UCU reported to the IfL that a survey of members had shown that 84% would not pay a fee on principle.

If anything, as the boycott of IfL demonstrates, opinions have hardened since then.

The nature and quality of service provided by the IfL in its current format

Any sector professional body will need to show potential members what benefits it provides which add value. IfL has singularly failed to do this.

Our survey shows widespread dissatisfaction with the services provided by IfL, and some confusion about whether it provides any service at all.

Common themes included:

- lack of clarity
- distance from the everyday lives of teachers
- narrow concepts of professionalism
- managerialist in approach
- bureaucratic.

In addition to these criticisms, members felt that the administration of IfL itself was poor value for money with billing errors common; poorly designed websites causing problems, and tools for recording CPD being inferior to other freely available ones

The undemocratic way in which the IfL is run

UCU considers that the IfL does not meet basic standards of accountability, openness and democracy that should be expected from a professional body created by statute.

Our members feel very strongly about this. Our survey of 1,100 staff produced no less than 580 individual comments on the poor governance arrangements within IfL. Areas of concern included:

- the lack of proper and accountable links between members, the Advisory Council and the Non Executive Board
- ineffective communications between members and the Advisory Council and the Board
- the style and tone of many 'final demand' communications with members
- perceptions that IfL is a remote body over whose policies and practices members have little influence.
- poor practice with regard to equality and diversity in its governance
- voting powers allowed for unelected stakeholders.

To be clear, no new body, however constituted and whatever services it provides, will survive unless it has democratic and transparent governance structures and is accountable to its members.

The future

It is important that the review understands clearly how CPD is experienced by staff within further education. UCU's recent survey addresses this key point.

Firstly, we asked about the importance of CPD. 83.2% of staff responded that it was either quite or very important.

Secondly, we asked about the quality of opportunities for CPD available. Just 50.1% said what was available currently met their expectations.

Thirdly, we asked whether employers should provide the necessary 'support, time and resources' to ensure staff have access to high quality CPD. 97.6% agreed.

Fourthly, we asked whether staff felt their employers currently met this responsibility and we found a mixed picture: 49.8% said their employer did not.

We believe this data provides an important context for what staff actually want and need with regard to CPD.

There is now a diversity of opinion within the profession about whether a general professional body is needed at all, not least because of the negative experience provided by IfL. However, in order to assist the review, UCU also asked its members, if there were to be such a body, what its priorities should be. We think the answers are instructive:

What activities should a professional association undertake?	
Lobbying for professional recognition and parity of esteem	74%
Campaigning for CPD entitlement	55%
Creating communities of subject specialists	54%
Developing, defining and kite marking CPD	48%
Validating CPD provision	37%
Professional regulation and licensing practices	36%

Source: UCU Survey, 2012. c.1,144 respondents. Table reflects % of respondents who marked options as very or quite important

We think this table makes it clear what the priorities of practitioners are. If an organisation is to exist, they want it to be able to promote the profession, and they want an organisation capable of holding employers to account over providing high quality CPD. What most do not want is a regulatory or licensing body along the lines of the soon to be abolished GTC.

We remain, despite the experience of the IfL, fully committed to professionalism. Indeed we would argue that many of our members achieve high standards, despite a lack of support for appropriate training and development at workplace level, precisely because they are themselves committed professionals.

However, the IfL top-down model is anathema to many of our members who conceive professionalism to be based on trust, accountability and the active promotion of core values.

We suggest in this regard that The Higher Education Academy, while not without its faults, provides a better model than that of IfL. It is neither fee- nor membership-based and, most important of all, it is considered useful by many who use its services.

We will be happy to elaborate on any of these points when we meet and hope we have communicated to you the passion and commitment our members feel for the vital work they do.

Sally Hunt

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