

FE teacher training and development: DfE's call for evidence and UCU's response

Towards the end of 2025, the DfE consulted on 'FE teacher initial training and development' and UCU responded. The DfE wanted insights into the needs of the FE sector specifically in relation to professional development, including what the barriers and opportunities are for ensuring that all FE teachers have access to high-quality professional development. This was UCU's response.

Methodology for providing UCU's evidence: we consulted with a selection of FE members who are current, practising FE teachers, who provided us with their input to this call for evidence, as well as drawing upon various UCU policy documents.

Historical context of professional development in the FE sector

In answering the call for evidence, we first note that it used to be a statutory requirement for all full-time FE teachers in England to complete 30-hours of Continuous Professional Development (CPD),¹ until it was revoked in 2012,² as part of a wider deregulation agenda by the coalition government. Since then, there has not been a statutory requirement for FE teachers to undertake CPD.

Current position relating to professional development in the FE sector

Despite there being no statutory requirement for FE teachers to undertake CPD, many FE institutions require FE teachers to undertake CPD as part of their internal policies; for instance, they may set annual CPD targets, link appraisals to CPD, or require evidence of CPD for Ofsted inspections. However, some of our members inform us that they do not always have a choice in their CPD; rather, they are directed into training to meet "some perceived need", and "usually before an Ofsted inspection". Ofsted does expect to see that

1 Under the Further Education Teachers' Continuing Professional Development and Registration (England) Regulations 2007

2 By the Further Education Teachers' Continuing Professional Development and Registration (England) (Revocation) Regulations 2012

staff have access to meaningful professional development, and that it impacts teaching quality; however, it does not enforce a specific quantity or type of professional development. We also understand from members that the tracking and monitoring of CPD is not uniform or standardised throughout the sector or may not always be professionally organised.

Another factor that is relevant to FE CPD is this: whilst it is not a statutory requirement for FE teachers to hold Qualifying Teacher Status (QTS) (although some do), some FE teachers may hold the Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) qualification, awarded by the Society for Education and Training (SET), although neither is the QTLS a statutory requirement. The Society for Education and Training (SET) is the professional membership body for teachers in the FE sector in England, and part of the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). If FE teachers hold the QTLS awarded by SET, they must maintain membership of SET and must engage in CPD to maintain their QTLS. However, not all FE teachers subscribe to SET membership and where that is the case, the legal position is that the only professional development obligation on FE teachers is that imposed contractually by their employers.

Barriers and opportunities for all FE teachers to have access to high-quality professional development

We first asked some of our members for their opinion on the **barriers** to access high-quality professional development and these are some of the reasons they gave:

- **Time pressures** – heavy workloads and timetabling leave little protected time for professional development. Most colleges have 'staff development days', where the curriculum is collapsed for the day; however, any missed guided learning hours are expected to be caught up, somehow, which is virtually impossible and adds to the spiralling workloads.
- **Online mandatory CPD** – this is what one member said about online mandatory CPD: *"At my college (and many others) we have mandatory CPD courses on things such as safeguarding and sexual harassment - training which is obviously very important and necessary and should be updated regularly and compliance tracked. However, we receive no protected time to complete this during staff development days, so it is instead pushed into our planning and prep time. Consequently, staff click through the training as fast as humanly possible or leave it running in the background while they do other tasks before answering the quiz at the end. It has become another tick box chore rather than the critical training it is meant to be".*
- **Funding constraints** - FE colleges have tighter budgets than schools, often limiting paid release or access to external training.
- **Casualised contracts** - many FE teachers are on part-time or hourly contracts (according to the 2023/24 DfE FE workforce data, just over 15% of the workforce are on some form of non-permanent contracts), which can exclude them from all but the mandatory CPD opportunities. According to one of our members, some institutions do

not pay their agency staff to come to additional CPD on their non-working days and "act as if they are doing their staff a favour by allowing them to attend, when in reality, it could contribute to curriculum delivery".

- **Performance-driving factors** – this is what one member had to say in relation to performance-driving factors: *'In some institutions, teaching development is less prioritised than compliance or qualification delivery. I hear from colleagues and fellow members that staff development days are often used to just gather all staff together for senior management to preach about the "grand vision" and lambast the staff for not delivering it. Often staff are not given a choice about which training they can go on. Instead, they are appointed to specific training by Heads of Area or equivalent to counter perceived failings in the department. This lack of agency and choice leads to a stagnation of professional growth and curiosity. It also leads to apathy around attending staff development due to staff not feeling it is a valuable use of their time. Common phrases I hear are: "This could have been an email" or "I'm drowning in marking and have spent 2-hours on this useless training"'.*
- **Inappropriate training given en masse to all teaching staff** – members report being dissatisfied with a 'one size fits all' type professional development training. An example of this is where teachers with many years in the job are being given the same training as Newly Qualified Teachers, leading to feeling that 'grandma is being taught to suck eggs'. This is especially the case when the training is being delivered by those who do not teach or have not done taught for a long time.

The opportunities for ensuring that all FE teachers have access to high-quality professional development

Members reported that despite the challenges in FE professional development, there are many opportunities, though they often depend on individual or institutional initiative and vary massively across the country. These are some of the opportunities, reported by members:

- **The Education and Training Foundation (ETF)**: the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) runs extensive CPD programmes, including digital teaching skills, subject enhancement, and leadership development.
- **The Society for Education and Training (SET) (part of the ETF)**: the Society for Education and Training (SET) (part of the ETF), provides CPD resources, professional standards and the QTLS/Advanced Teacher Status (ATS) routes.
- **In-houses professional development sessions**: some members said in-house professional development sessions by some FE colleges can be very good and useful. They said this is especially the case when the professional development is less about "preaching to" staff and more about sharing good practice/peer observations, collaborative learning, mentoring training and opportunities, or learning communities.
- **External training providers**: members also commented that there are also external training providers, who deliver good professional development training that enhance pedagogy; however, funding constraints limits access to quality external providers.

- **Collaborative projects and networks:** members also reported that there are useful collaborative projects and networks that support professional development e.g. Centre for Excellence in Maths, JISC, the Blended Learning Consortium and various subject specific networks that support pedagogical research.
- **Higher education qualifications:** members also pointed out that most colleges offer funded or supported higher education opportunities for staff, such as PGCE, MA in Education/leadership/inclusive practice, or professional doctorates. There is, however, usually, a requirement for staff who have received this sort of investment, to stay at the institution for a certain length of time after the end of their course, so that institutions receive a 'return' on their investment.
- **Industry placement or partnerships:** another form of professional development that can be available to FE staff is industry placements or partnerships, particularly for vocational teachers to update their industry knowledge. It makes perfect sense for lecturers in subjects such as motor vehicle mechanics to update their knowledge in, say, the latest techniques for newer vehicles; however, placement has been known to be forced on non-vocational FE teachers e.g. maths or science teachers. Some members commented that it can feel very much like asking an employed adult to go and get work experience like a 16-year-old. Another issue that members identified with industry placements is that teachers must source and secure the placements themselves, usually during time off such as their Easter break. Some members commented that there is a sense that some placements are another 'tick box' exercise, which has not been well thought through.
- **Digital/online self-directed learning:** members said that digital and self-directed online learning, webinars, micro-credentials, and short courses are increasingly common and flexible; however, one of the issues is having to fit these around the workload.

Generally, members reported that training which provides something tangible that they can use in the classroom or staffroom, and is backed by pedagogical research, is highly valued. Time saving strategies and 'work smarter not harder' tips, that 'actually work', are also well received.

The closing words go to one of our members who said: '*Professional development in FE is much like everything else in FE - chronically underfunded, contributes to increasing workloads and differ considerably from institution to institution*'.

UCU Policy

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