

## Towards a UCU policy on professionalism: a discussion paper for UCU members

### **Introduction**

This paper has been produced by the union's education committee in order to stimulate a discussion among members. The objective is to use members' responses to inform a policy position on professionalism for submission to UCU Congress in June 2013.

There is a longer version of this paper on the UCU website for members who would like to read more about the history of professionalism and the discussion of the concept in the academic literature. Please see: [www.ucu.org.uk/professionalism](http://www.ucu.org.uk/professionalism).

The main propositions underlying this discussion paper are:

- that professionalism in our education service is under serious attack from a culture of managerialism, a lack of respect for the expertise, views and commitment of professional staff and the imposition of ever- increasing workloads
- that we suffer from an absence of institutional arrangements that would support the development, defence and recognition of our members' professionalism
- that we need our own clearly-articulated, persuasive version of professionalism that we can deploy effectively to campaign for the effective provision of those means of support, defence and recognition
- that we should be pro-active in promoting the contribution that our members make to delivering and supporting high quality teaching and research – their professionalism is the foundation of that contribution

This paper is a starting point; any ensuing discussion will need to establish a common understanding and ownership of a basic concept of professionalism that runs across all UCU members. It will then be necessary to build onto this basic and underpinning concept further elaborations to explore the circumstances and issues for particular sections of UCU membership.

### **The attack on professionalism**

Any explanation of the kind of professionalism that is now required will need to take account of the external forces and circumstances facing education and educationalists. It must also take account of the insidious ways in which education has become infected by managerialism, commodification and marketisation, and how these processes become internalised and then eat away at the professional soul of UCU members.

There has been an ideological shift towards a narrowly instrumentalist view of the purposes of education, focusing on education for employability and viewing learners as “consumers”. Alongside this attitude has come a culture of audit and inspection, driven by the use of targets and accompanied by intrusive and oppressive styles of management. This is the culture of managerialism. It is characterised by the substitution of regulation and compliance for the lived experience and knowledge of professional practitioners. This has done immense damage to the interests of education in its true sense and has undermined and devalued the professionalism of our members.

A concept of professionalism that UCU puts forward must be one that UCU members can own. It is one that will arise from their experiences and knowledge, but within the context of, and informed by, current social and political realities. It will be a professionalism that seeks to communicate and gain recognition for the value of what our members do, but also supporting their efforts to reflect on and improve their ability to advance teaching, learning, scholarship and research.

## **Support, defence and recognition of professionalism**

Strong professions tend to have effective structures to support the professional development, training, qualifications and accountability of their members. These structures are largely owned by the professions themselves and serve to defend and promote both the professional standards and the aspirations of their members.

The sectors in which UCU members work are littered with the corpses of failed attempts at institutionalisation and regulation (or de-regulation) of professional requirements and recognition. Too often the arrangements have been dominated by employers or government and have resulted in the imposition of demands on staff that merely add to their ever-increasing workloads with little or no regard to their actual professional needs. They have been about productivity rather than quality; prescription rather than autonomy; being called to account, rather than genuine accountability.

Our alternative would need to get the balance right, giving a central role to the voice of the profession, while recognising the wider society’s legitimate interest in standards and accountability. The UCU can play a central role in this project, but whether the UCU can itself become the professional body, bearing in mind its responsibilities to its members as a trade union, is less clear.

## **The UCU alternative**

There are a number of characteristics that are normally taken to define a profession:

- The use of skills based on theoretical and applied knowledge in accordance with the professional values and ethics through which accountability is exercised
- Through this accountability, the profession and the professionals are accorded trust and freedom from unnecessary employer or state micro-management and interference

- This allows the professionals to have autonomy in their work and to safeguard their values and standards on behalf of the wider public good while resisting political interference
- The updating and extension of the specialist knowledge and skills through properly supported and funded continuing professional development
- A code of professional conduct and an expectation that the members of the profession will observe the code
- At times some professions have also controlled entry into their ranks and the arrangements for the award of recognised qualifications and professional accreditation.

Members might find it useful to think about how these (and possibly other) characteristics might find relevant expression in their area of work. There may be particular considerations, for example, for those involved in vocational education in FE or in prison education; in HE, “values and ethics” would include academic freedom; for academic-related staff the role of the academic team in supporting teaching and learning will be important.

The concept of “dual professionalism” may also be worth thinking about. This puts forward the view that a lecturer possesses two forms of professional expertise: around their subject and around the practice of teaching. However, this has been criticised as an artificial distinction between two interdependent aspects of teacher professionalism. It is also vital to understand how the balance between the two aspects of dual professionalism will vary between sectors and roles.

## Your views

We welcome all views on the issues raised in this paper (and in its parent paper on the website). Some of the questions that members may want to address might include:

- What are the key elements in any alternative UCU definition of the professionalism of the members that we represent?
- How do we take account of the different professional needs and aspirations of our members?
- Is a single concept of professionalism, embracing all members, feasible?
- How do we balance professional autonomy and legitimate demands for accountability?
- What structures (professional bodies and regulatory regimes), if any, should we be advocating in order to ensure that we can defend and promote our professionalism effectively?
- Should we be considering mechanisms for controlling to some degree or other entrance to the profession and the award of qualifications and accreditation?
- Are there models and experiences from other professions on which we could usefully draw, particularly professional bodies with which UCU members are already involved (nursing, medicine, law, engineering etc)?
- What is the proper role of UCU in this project?

Please send your comments to: Dan Taubman ([dtaubman@ucu.org.uk](mailto:dtaubman@ucu.org.uk)) by **21 January 2013**.