Professionalism in further education
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The Education & Training Foundation

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Terminology

Throughout this document we use the term “teachers and trainers” or “teachers” to cover all those who directly support learning in further education and skills, including lecturers, teachers, trainers, tutors, assessors, instructors and trainee teachers. We use the terms “colleges” and “learning providers” to cover the range of organisations that provide learning outside schools and higher education.

About the Institute for Learning (IfL)

IfL is the independent, professional membership body representing teachers, trainers, tutors, assessors, instructors and student teachers in the further education and skills system, and supporting excellence in professional teachers’ and trainers’ practice for learners. IfL’s role has included conferring Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status, which since 1 April 2012 has been recognised as equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) for teaching in schools, and Associate Teacher Learning and Skills (ATLS).

About the 157 Group

The 157 Group represents a consortium of large and influential colleges in the further education sector. It was formed in 2006 in response to paragraph 157 of Sir Andrew Foster’s report on the future of further education colleges, in which he argued that principals of large, successful colleges should play a greater role in policymaking.

About the Institute of Education (IOE)

The IOE was founded in 1902, as a teacher training college in London. Now a graduate college of the University of London, the IOE is a world-class research and teaching institution.

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Introduction

It has been good to see, in recent years and months, an increased focus on the place of vocational education in our education and skills system. The coalition government has made much of its desire to create a system that is as well understood as its ‘academic’ counterpart and to address a number of problems that, together, could risk failure to ensure that the future workforce is skilled for the jobs that will need doing.

An ongoing problem in this country is that there are a number of ingrained social attitudes towards the notion of vocational education. These will not be dealt with overnight, but the mantra of successive generations of politicians has focused on the need for vocational education to be of a high quality and delivered professionally. When this is achieved, they believe, respect will flow naturally.

Many would argue strongly that what is currently being delivered is already of a high quality – and professional. Those who teach in vocational settings often have the demands of what we have referred to as ‘dual’ professionalism – that is, a knowledge of their subject matter as well as a knowledge of pedagogy in a vocational context. Many thousands of teachers in further education get up and go to work every morning to do a first-class job and, in many cases, to re-enthuse those whom the school system has failed to enthuse.

In a drive to support improvement in vocational education, the government has introduced a plethora of initiatives over the last three years. New programmes, such as traineeships, have been set up. New types of institution, such as university technical colleges, have been created.

Qualification regimes have been reviewed and made more ‘robust’. Much debate has taken place about how funding should be allocated, and how employers can be more involved. And both Ofsted and the government have adopted new approaches to accountability and the measures they use to judge the performance of those in further education.

Alongside all this practical change, two things have signalled a longer-term approach to the future of our vocational education system. The Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL), chaired by Frank McLoughlin, reported in 2013 after a year of inquiry, and set out a new framework for how we might think about and deliver vocational education.

At the same time, a new organisation, the Education and Training Foundation, was being set up. Owned and driven by those in further education, it was charged with supporting the sector to establish an improved vocational education system.

Workforce professionalism is a key theme of the Foundation’s work and, as a sector well known for its self-reflection and ability to constantly self-improve, we are proud that this work can be informed by a huge legacy of work that has already been undertaken.
What is summarised in this document is only a part of the research and practice development that has gone on in recent years.

When the 157 Group, the Institute for Learning and the Institute of Education first came together in 2011 to examine issues of professionalism, we wanted to be at the leading edge of debate in the sector and in policy circles. We wanted to engage the sector in a proper debate about the nature of professionalism; to shine a light on good practice across the country; to influence the thinking of policymakers and others; and to bring an element of academic rigour to our discussions and deliberations.

Our events and activities have involved practitioners from more than 50 institutions and leaders of many more. We have engaged those at the heart of the Foundation – and its predecessor, the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) – who have supported our work.

We have worked with learners themselves and tried to understand how professionalism affects their learning and what their expectations of professional teachers genuinely are. And we have learned from practice across the globe, as well as the excellent and innovative work going on in many of our own further education institutions across England.

A first series of seminars in 2012–13 focused on the leadership of professionalism – from creating expansive learning environments in educational institutions through to encouraging employers to work in partnership to foster professionalism.1

A second series of seminars took place in 2013–14, in which we examined perspectives on professionalism in vocational teaching and learning from international, national, institutional and classroom perspectives.

In all these seminars, input from academics has been given depth by input from practitioners – whether principals and senior leaders or teachers themselves. The resulting conclusions give much food for thought.

Also included in this document is an overview of the groundbreaking workshop held in 2012 by the 157 Group and IfL in which we brought together more than 70 people – senior leaders, teachers and learners – to tackle the fundamental question of what great teaching and learning actually is. Its implications for professional development were profound.2

Three years on, as we share a fourth publication about our joint endeavours, we believe that our conclusions and reflections offer a thoughtful agenda for future work. We hope that you agree when you read this report.

As the Institute for Learning prepares to close and transfer its legacy to the Education and Training Foundation, we are confident that the conclusions in this report will form an important part of that legacy.

All those who have been involved in our work together since 2011 will continue to work – with the support of the army of people who work hard every day in our skills system – to improve our understanding of what it means to be professional and, in doing this, to improve our delivery of a high-quality learning experience for all our students and for the employers who depend upon the results of our efforts.

Peter Roberts, Chair of the 157 Group and Chief Executive of Leeds City College

Sue Crowley
Chair of the Institute for Learning (IfL)

Ann Hodgson
Co-director of the Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation at the Institute of Education (IOE) and IfL patron

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1 See Institute for Learning, 2012. Leading learning and letting go: building expansive learning environments in FE.
The partnership

In this short interview, Dr Lynne Sedgmore CBE (executive director of the 157 Group), Dr Jean Kelly (chief executive of IfL) and Professor Ann Hodgson (co-director of the Centre for Post-14 Research and Innovation at the IOE and IfL patron) talk about the legacy of three years’ worth of work conducted in partnership.

How did the partnership come about?

Lynne Sedgmore: All three organisations had been doing work in the field of professionalism and leadership – and in 2011, the 157 Group and CfBT Education Trust published *Leading learning in further education*, which garnered a lot of interest across the sector. Our plea for teaching and learning to be put at the heart of leadership seemed to resonate – with practitioners in particular. So it was good that we were talking to IfL about doing something jointly on behalf of our members (the college leaders) and their members (the practitioners).

Jean Kelly: We decided the time was right to do some genuine and high-level reflection on what it means to be a professional in further education, and what the implications of that are for both policy and leadership. IfL was conducting a large-scale survey of members about their attitudes to professionalism, and we wanted a place to air some of the findings from that. So we agreed to run a series of events – seminars and workshops – to really get to the heart of what was going on in the sector and how leaders and teachers were developing their own practice.

Ann Hodgson: We at the IOE were delighted to become a part of this work: we have, for a long time, led work on the position of vocational education in our post-14 education landscape, and colleagues at the Institute have been undertaking research with further education institutions and others to establish the best conditions for bringing about the highest quality teaching and learning – focusing especially on approaches to professional development. It felt absolutely right to bring some of that research – and our wider thinking – to the table.

What did you hope to achieve?

Jean Kelly: We wanted to acknowledge, first and foremost, that teachers in the further education sector are a professional workforce. We wanted to hear from them how they took ownership of their own practice and to showcase the reflective approach to professional development that had been evident to IfL since its inception. We wanted to make sure that there was a forum where others – in the sector and beyond – could learn from these approaches and develop their own professionalism.

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**Lynne Sedgmore:** I think we also wanted to offer some messages to leaders in further education – who feel under pressure to deliver against targets and to worry about funding and Ofsted – that it was OK to focus on teaching and learning. In fact, it was more than just OK – it was absolutely vital if all the other elements of good organisational performance were to follow. We also wanted the people making policy decisions about the future of further education to see very clearly that we are a mature sector that is capable of engaging in a very profound level of discourse about our own practice.

**Ann Hodgson:** And we wanted to make sure that people had a chance to really think about some of the findings coming out of our research, both nationally and internationally. As CAVTL began its inquiry, we wanted our seminars and events to complement its deliberations and findings – and we worked very closely with Frank and his team to inform their work.

**What have you got out of it?**

**Ann Hodgson:** It has been an immensely rich experience for me – and for all my colleagues who have been involved. Our own thinking has been stimulated by the contributions from people across the sector, and I would like to think that some of the key themes that emerged can be applicable more broadly across the education system.

**Jean Kelly:** I have been impressed by the range of experiences and thoughts that we have been able to showcase – from novel approaches to managing professional development to partnership approaches to employer engagement. I feel we have brought to a wider audience the hard work and efforts of some of the people at the leading edge of professional practice in further education. As IfL comes to an end, I have joy in my heart to know that so much committed work is going on across the sector.

**And what do you think the wider impact has been?**

**Lynne Sedgmore:** We have proven that the further education world can engage in meaningful debate and reflection about its own practice, without too much interference from others. I would like to think that it is work such as this that encouraged the creation of a truly sector-owned development body in the Education and Training Foundation. If people are mature enough to reflect on something as fundamental as their own professionalism, they can be trusted to look after themselves.

**Jean Kelly:** I know we have had a big impact in colleges as well. Several have replicated some of our events at staff development sessions – especially our *Great teaching and learning* workshop, which enabled the learner voice to be heard, loudly. We have been approached by many people who have taken part, or simply read the publications that have accompanied the events, to tell us that the content has affected one aspect of their approach to their own working life.

**Ann Hodgson:** I think we have laid the foundations for some exciting work ahead. On several occasions we have brought together potentially disparate groups – from trade unions to vice-principals, from practising teachers to researchers and consultants – and we have, despite engaging in some healthy debate and disagreement, enabled them to form a collective view of how professionalism might evolve into the future.

**Lynne Sedgmore:** I think we have also established something of a vision for how the whole skills system might work in the future. We have demonstrated that the biggest impact on learning is felt at the most local levels – in one classroom or one city – and that top-down approaches to imposing improvement rarely succeed. These overarching principles are ones we will take forward into the next decade.

**So what happens next?**

**Ann Hodgson:** We continue to develop our thoughts and to play an active role in the future direction of vocational education in this country. It is vital that policy is informed by research and by the views of those on the ground, and activities like the ones described in this report are an excellent way for the government to hear those views.

**Lynne Sedgmore:** There is a broad coalition forming in further education in support of local solutions delivered by autonomous, professional leaders, teachers and employers. The lessons from this partnership give weight to the body of opinion that what is needed is less – rather than more – policy and regulation and that we have the ability and capacity to lead our own solutions to the problem of workplace skills in this country. The 157 Group and others in that coalition can use these messages to influence national policy in the coming months and years.

**Jean Kelly:** And teachers will continue to develop. As they have shown throughout these events, they have an amazing capacity to do things differently, and to reinvent themselves in order to improve the learning for their students. They need the space and the permission to do so, and I hope that there will be room in the future for some kind of activity, such as the work we have undertaken, to provoke and inspire them to carry on developing as professionals.
The first perspectives

Leading learning and letting go

At our first seminar, in February 2012, discussions focused on ways in which further education organisations can improve learner outcomes by supporting and promoting professional practice and development for teachers and trainers. The central issue here was how best to lead culture and systems that encourage teachers and trainers to take ownership of their professional practice and development, and that deliver measurable improvements in learning outcomes.

A number of recurring themes and issues arose from the seminar discussions:

- The further education and skills system requires a cultural shift to enable it to improve further the quality of teaching and learning.
- Leaders in further education should make the leading of learning for staff and learners their top strategic priority.
- Good teaching is born of innovation, and this involves a degree of experimentation that is unlikely to happen if an organisation is highly controlling or risk-averse.
- Expansive workplaces encourage teachers and trainers to work creatively as teams, taking responsibility for their own professional development, and they facilitate and reward innovation and experimentation in teaching and learning.
- Leadership support for research-informed professional practice and development provides a strong basis for the type of step-change required in teaching and learning.

It was evident from many of the discussions that took place during the seminar that the business-focused culture of leadership and senior management and the pedagogy-driven culture of teachers and trainers were, in many instances, coalescing in common purpose to improve the quality of teaching and learning in further education.

Perceptions of professional development being something that is done to employees, usually as a punishment or a reward, were being eroded and replaced by more inclusive approaches that allow staff to play a far greater role in shaping and delivering their own professional learning and development.

It was also felt that little innovation in teaching and learning would occur without a willingness to experiment and take risks. And many at the seminar recognised that teachers and trainers do have a responsibility to manage their own professionalism and professional development.

It was clear from discussions that professionalism ought not to be thought of as an immutable condition that suffers no interference, but rather as an evolving state that adapts continually to developments in practice, scholarship and research. The message that teachers are also learners was writ large in the seminar.

Great teaching and learning

In May 2012, we welcomed more than 70 representatives of sector bodies; senior college, work-based training and adult and community learning provider leaders; curriculum managers; teachers; trainers; and learners of all ages and backgrounds to our second seminar.

The day was designed to be vibrant and challenging, with participants taken outside their comfort zones, using an experimental methodology. Participants worked on creative tasks, considered the issues using their own experiences, and were encouraged to work in groups of people with whom they were unfamiliar.

The overarching conclusions were that four areas must be prioritised in order to enable great teaching and learning to flourish:

- The building of teacher-learner relationships – which requires a particular professional understanding and skillset among those who are employed to teach
- The creation of a genuine teacher community – where the sharing of good practice, of experiments that did not work and why, as well as of promising or effective innovations, can happen openly and honestly in a culture of professionalism
- The development of learner skills and involvement in the learning process – which goes beyond simply surveying ‘learner voice’ and leads to genuine co-creation of learning programmes
- An absolute commitment by leaders to determinedly create the cultures that foster these essentials, and a personal leadership focus on teaching and learning as a top priority and one to which they pay great attention.
As well as these key elements, it was clear from those present that great teaching and learning depends, initially at least, on what might be thought of as many and varied ‘human factors’. Given the event’s focus on teaching and learning, some key components of good pedagogical practice were suggested, and a number of the new ideas generated were consolidated towards the end of the day. These included, for example, powerful possibilities for new uses of technology in classroom or workshop settings.

One outcome of the day was the creation of a free web-based resource bank.4

**Leading partnerships with employers and building collaborative professionalism**

A further two seminars were held early in 2013 to focus on the ways in which collaborative professionalism could be built alongside employer engagement in the skills system. They took place at a useful time for policy development in this area.

These seminars heard from leading academics, college principals, local enterprise partnership (LEP) representatives and teachers themselves, in order to consider a rounded way of looking at the professional needs of our relationships with employers.

Among the key points identified were the following:

- A local learning ecology is a useful way to think about the area served by a further education provider, and this ecology may be bigger or smaller than the local authority, county or region in which an FE provider is based and in which it tends to operate currently.

- Further education providers, particularly colleges, are big players and major catalysts in these ecologies, and identifying leaders in an ecology is a key step to building partnerships.

- The ability to set aside competitive urges and history is key to building positive and dynamic partnerships.

- Many things at the macro level (e.g. government policy) cannot readily be changed, whereas there is a lot of change that providers can effect at a local level through partnership working.

- Partnerships enhance learning for students by extending the reach of a provider into business and industry and, very often, geographically. They bring industry expertise back into provider organisations.

- People at all levels in an organisation, especially teachers, should be engaged in partnership relations: that way, those relationships will be held in higher esteem by staff, learners and social partners.

- Time is required to build partnerships. Teachers and trainers, in particular, need time and space to develop and sustain specialist vocational partnerships.

- Professionals, not least leaders, must be prepared to take risks and try not to blame people if things do not work out as planned.

- Teachers and trainers must feel confident and empowered about their professional identities in order to develop and retain the agility required to adapt and engage with rapidly changing circumstances.

- Staff benefit enormously from good partnerships since their professional development as vocational experts and as teachers can be built into, or implicit within, the challenges and experiences involved in partnership working.

- Teachers and trainers may need to add a third layer to their existing dual professionalism as vocational experts and educators – one that allows them as professionals to mediate and engage with commercial and partnership activities.

4 Available to view at [http://greatinfetumblr.com](http://greatinfetumblr.com)
Leading professionalism and professional learning

Our work in 2012–13 set the scene for a major examination of the nature of professionalism and, during a series of seminars in 2013–14, we have explored this topic at four critical levels – the international level, the national level, the institutional level and the classroom/workshop level.

These seminars have built on the understanding developed in our previous activities and pursued a number of critical themes to do with autonomy, human relationships, system change, partnerships and localism.

The international dimension

This seminar set out to examine key aspects of the international approach to developing professionalism, with input from Dr Alan Tuckett OBE, president of the International Council for Adult Education, and Professor Ken Spours of the IOE.

Dr Tuckett suggested it was surprising that there was little international debate about professionalism in vocational education, given the poor progress towards meeting the Millennium Goals. What debate there is is presented as a dichotomy between the focus on human capital and the focus on humanism. Our tendency in the UK to be influenced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the ‘human capital’ argument has led us to focus on the process of teaching, believing that (as the World Bank claims) testing will drive quality. We do not examine the desired outcomes of education, and we make little reference to practice outside Europe.

What is apparent is that, unlike in Europe, there is little sense of collective responsibility for education in the UK. We would do well to remember the words of Raymond Williams, when considering why people choose to access education – “to understand, adapt to and shape the world” – and establish a common approach to professionalism based on this need.

Professor Spours suggested that an approach of ‘triple professionalism’ could help us to change this. By triple professionalism, he meant the ability of professionals to be experts in their own profession or subject area; to be inspirational and expert teachers; and to be able to work with other social partners, particularly in their locality or region. This approach to professionalism could be characterised as democratic, activist and ecological, and could underpin the co-production of knowledge and professional development, with leadership being seen in a supportive role. Triple professionalism would be ethically driven, but would require support in terms of:

- a longer time for initial teacher training
- new demands for the skills of teachers and the need to have a master's degree
- expansive work environments
- local, national and international communities of practice focused on improving teaching and learning
- local democratic accountability
- inspection focused on improvement
- a national college of educators.

Participants raised several critical questions:

1. What is the role of the state in ‘new times’? How do you balance local and national accountability? Does triple professionalism have to be bottom-up?

2. Is professionalism about what teachers do themselves or about the effect they have on learners?

3. Should debates about professionalism focus on process or outcomes? Are we too tied to the ‘input-output’ model of education?

4. Is local accountability incompatible with national licensing?

5. Can professionals be credible in a world where the future is uncertain?

6. How much funding from the government should be devoted to professional development?
The national dimension

This seminar set out to examine key aspects of the current national debate on professionalism, with input from Professor Geoff Whitty of the IOE and Bath Spa University, Professor Alison Fuller of the IOE and Sue Crowley, chair of IfL.

Professor Whitty commented that in recent years there has been a trend towards reducing the national regulation of the teaching profession. At the same time a series of ‘branded professionalisms’ has developed, for example, with organisations like Teach First or academy chains adding a localised and organisation-specific dimension to a core national requirement.

He wondered whether this was the result of political ideology, or a consequence of the move away from standardised national systems in favour of ‘small systems’. This post-modernist approach, he argued, leads naturally to a sense of ‘messiness’. He noted that this trend is visible not just in England.

Acknowledging that a greater variety of approaches to professionalism will continue to exist whichever government is in power, Professor Whitty said that the question for teachers is whether such deregulation represents ‘deprofessionalisation’ or, in fact, an opportunity to ‘reprofessionalise’. There is the potential to move away from the managerial professionalism of the New Labour years towards a more ‘democratic’ professionalism.

Professor Fuller argued that workplaces set the context for professional development and professionalism. Her research has looked at how a range of different workplaces operate and she suggested that it is helpful to remember that colleges are workplaces (as well, of course, as places for learning). This context for professional learning needs to take into account the vertical and horizontal pressures on organisational managers as well as the extent to which workers have discretion in relation to their own professional decisions.

In one case study Professor Fuller researched, the employer viewed management as pedagogy, with managers given as their key responsibility the mentoring and tutoring of their team. The philosophy was that contributions to the learning of staff helped ‘the bottom line’. This, in turn, exemplified the theory of social learning.

Ms Crowley reflected on IfL’s process of defining professionalism since its inception in 2002, which had been largely based on member input. In the IfL model the role of the ‘expert’ is diminished and the importance of continuing professional learning paramount, as it is not possible to be an expert in someone else’s life and learning and knowledge is constantly changing. But a commitment to deep, collective learning is hard and requires some ‘unlearning’. This is necessary in a globalised world where the views of students count as much as those of professionals. Professional autonomy must be ‘earned’ by challenging and learning from yourself and others.

Considering the reaction of many teachers to IfL’s approach, Ms Crowley concluded that much of the reluctance shown by those who disagreed with a regulated approach to continuing professional development (CPD) was down to a distrust of IfL, which was seen as a proxy for the government or for their employers. Distrust links to individualism and managerialism in a vicious circle where autonomy is about independence rather than interdependence and management is about sticks rather than carrots. This vicious circle was a barrier to any acceptance of the reframed professional and the importance of professional learning.

The trust required to make the new approach to professionalism take hold is not top-down or bottom-up, but rather the result of many of the characteristics described in an expansive learning environment, where professionals are interdependent and constantly learning alongside their students.
The institutional dimension

This seminar set out to discuss approaches to improving professionalism in individual institutions, with input from Melanie Hunt and John Webber of Sussex Downs College and Paul Wakeling and Paul Nutter of Havering Sixth Form College.

Ms Hunt and Mr Webber discussed their journey through three Ofsted inspections, during which they believe they have achieved significant culture change in the college. They described at the start a distinct set of cultures following the merger of independent colleges and a situation where teachers felt dislocated from management. Ms Hunt reflected that trust was her key tool as a new principal to understanding the real quality of teaching and learning. A core set of values was agreed – integrity, community, aspiration, responsibility and equality – and a serious debate about the leadership of learning was instigated across the whole management team.

This led to a series of practical actions:

- The ‘studentship project’, which identified the skills, behaviours, beliefs and qualities of a successful student, and began to shape the dimensions of how staff should see themselves
- A thorough analysis of every aspect of teaching and learning commented on in the Ofsted report, with its strengths and weaknesses identified, enabled honest and soul-searching conversations to happen among the staff body and led to a new approach to CPD
- Gradings were removed from the lesson observation scheme, as they were felt to hinder real understanding of the issues being identified for development
- Two key CPD events gave the sense of ‘all being in it together’ – one on effective questioning techniques and one on ‘making learning visible’ to staff, students and observers
- Teacher learning communities were established and a series of supported experiments facilitated through small development grants
- Curriculum managers were given responsibility for leading quality improvement, with teachers placed on an ‘intensive’, ‘supported’ or ‘independent and contributing’ CPD pathway
- Strong practitioners and ‘opinion leaders’ were seconded as ‘development advisers’ once a week to support improvement elsewhere.

Mr Wakeling and Mr Nutter spoke about their efforts to move the college on from principal-led sessions focusing on teaching and learning, which encouraged some but did not create an overall culture change. Their change of approach started from the key premise that the principal had to demonstrate that he was committed to his own learning and that the job then was to get all staff and students to do the same.

The college took a strident lead in forging collaboration with other providers across Havering, with the definition of what a ‘Havering 19-year-old’ should look like. This enabled consensus to form around the type of education the college wanted to deliver and how it fitted within the local learning ecology.

The fundamental values behind their context-driven approach to professional development were that:

- staff are competent professionals motivated by individual learning and organisational success
- staff may be afraid of failure in experimentation and this fear of failure may lead to defensive behaviours
- the creation of time for professional reflection was more effective than a ‘smorgasbord’ of delivered development sessions during a four-day staff development period in the summer, and it was seen as important to build this time into the weekly slots formerly given over to meetings.

Twelve key characteristics were common to the two case studies:

1. The need for trust and respect
2. The need to be clear about values
3. The need to respect differentiation in approach
4. The positive view of Ofsted as a catalyst for change
5. The importance of research-based practice
6. The value of an external prompt for change, perhaps through a visiting speaker
7. The fact that any process must be context-specific
8. The paramount focus on teaching and learning
9. The need for everyone to feel ‘in it together’
10. The importance of taking time while maintaining momentum and ‘freshness’
11. The provision of space for genuine experimentation
12. The focus on students.
The classroom/workshop dimension

This seminar was designed to explore the links between policy and practice at a classroom level, with contributions from Sabrina Poma of the IOE, Sheila Thorpe of Chichester College and Helen Pettifor of the Education and Training Foundation.

The premise of the seminar was to examine whether the kind of ‘slow’ professionalism described in previous seminars, with practitioners able to be truly reflective and developing professionals, was possible in the context of education policy evolution in England.

Ms Poma outlined her research into what she called the ‘meso buffer zone’ between policymakers and professionals. Her interviews have led her to believe that further education professionals are interested in education policy, but that the ‘buffer zone’ organisations – such as IfL, the Education and Training Foundation, Ofsted, unions, universities and groupings of teacher educators – are not seen as having the agency to effectively challenge or influence the setting of this policy.

Furthermore, FE policy in particular often arises from a ‘deficit model’, to deal with perceived problems – either with colleges, or with teachers themselves. As a consequence, many professionals adopt one of five personae in response to policy development: a few become ‘enforcers’, and a few ‘activists’ in opposition to policy. Some simply ‘surf’ the wave, believing a new policy will come about soon, and others ‘manipulate’, either finding ways around the policy or using it purely to their own ends. The majority, though, are simply ‘compliers’, with little real engagement, and many cite policy development as their reason for quitting FE altogether.

Ms Poma suggested there was a need for the FE professional community to be more collegial and proactive in its response to policy – perhaps by forming an accessible and media-savvy ‘community of practice’ to work with, feed back to and challenge the government.

Ms Thorpe outlined the interpretation of policy in Chichester College on its journey towards a recent Ofsted ‘outstanding’ grading. She described the absolute focus on teaching and learning at all levels, with staff encouraged to join an ‘innovation group’, which was actively encouraged to take risks. Talking about teaching and learning was described as an ‘any time, any place, anywhere activity’, and this approach had led to better communication and a sense of shared values, in which engagement with policy could be more effective.

Management development at Chichester College works alongside teacher CPD, with professional learning coaches expected to have a grip on policy and to influence both practice and college strategy. All staff are encouraged to get out of the college to seek influence from across the UK and Europe, and Ms Thorpe contended that this commonality of approach, along with active engagement at a local and national level, had enabled the college to pre-empt and shape some recent policy decisions.

Ms Pettifor suggested that the Education and Training Foundation was beginning to shape its approach as part of the ‘buffer zone’ between policy and professionals. She described the organisation’s commitment to mediating effectively and helping to stave off some of the perceived ‘urgency’ of government officials, in order to enable FE professionalism to develop in a ‘slow’ way, from the bottom up. But she reminded the group that every individual learner in our colleges has only one chance, so there is also an urgency to do the best possible job, and the Foundation’s work would be aware of this too.

Group discussion noted that debate about professionalism in FE is still relatively new, and that we can be proud of the nature of the discussion. Participants noted that it is in the power of those in the sector to challenge the notion of ‘the Cinderella sector’, and questioned whether our reaction to policy would require a change in the nature of how we do the job, or a change in the nature of the people who do the job.

The seminar felt that trust across all levels of education was key to developing effective professionalism, and that this is best built by an open and transparent culture. The adversarial nature of policymaking in the UK may militate against this, however, and participants felt the need for greater consensus-building at a national level.

Summing up, Professor Hodgson highlighted the need for professional generosity – in order for teachers to have the space to develop their influence and practice. She felt that research could be key in supporting an improvement in the reputation and positioning of FE, and noted finally that developing true professionalism requires considerable and sustained energy – this she described as the desired ‘golden thread’ running through all organisations and the sector nationally.
Conclusions

This series of seminars has added to our earlier work on teaching and learning and brought into real focus some key points for the further development of professionalism in the further education sector. The discussions were varied and always energetic, and more than 90 people took part, with some ‘dipping in’ to one or two seminars and others following the whole series.

It seems that a number of themes arise for policymakers and those wishing to support enhanced professionalism, which we believe will only lead to improved teaching and learning in the sector. We summarise these here.

- The professionalism of further education is based fairly and squarely on the rigorous interrogation of teaching and learning and its development through research – the more this is grasped absolutely as the priority in all institutions, the more professional the workforce will become.

- It is clear that sharing common goals and ‘talking the same language’ is important for policymakers, those in the ‘buffer zone’ and FE professionals alike – while the appearance of consensus is apparent, in practice this may require more work.

- The exact definition of professionalism is a matter of some disagreement – but most agree that it evolves from mature relationships, partnership and collaboration, and it is important that this aspect is emphasised by policymakers and enabled by those in the ‘buffer zone’.

- Professionalism must be ‘bottom-up’, and this has implications for the development of national, or even institution-wide, initiatives. Professionals will be more engaged if they have a ‘stake’ in what they are doing, and this also requires them to be able to take the time and space to develop their own practice.

- Professional generosity is a responsibility – it is not reasonable to expect the space required to develop one’s own approach to be always and easily available – professionals must organise their own working lives in such a way as to be engaged appropriately.

- Trust is key to developing such professionalism. For policymakers and professionals alike to fulfil their responsibilities, the work of further education must be conducted in an open and transparent way, with honest discussions about the nature of teaching and learning and the impact of policy decisions at all levels.

- Professionalism develops most effectively through risk-taking. Cultures within colleges must enable this and celebrate it, even if risks taken are not always immediately successful. Simple compliance does not develop professionalism.

- Professionals work best within frameworks and managerial structures that are as localised as possible. Again, this has clear implications for the future direction of policy at a national level, and with the advent of combined authorities and LEPs, we may be entering an era where this localism is easier to achieve.

- The ‘dual professionalism’ (or even ‘multiple professionalism’) of teachers in further education must be celebrated, as it adds an extra dimension to the professional identity. It is potentially the key ingredient in ensuring that further education can lead the way in the development of employability and higher-level technical skills among the learners of the future – and others in the education world may have much to learn from this ‘dual professionalism’.

Those in IfL, the 157 Group and the IOE who have led these seminars have been energised by the level of debate; by the combination of academic and professional expertise that has been evident in our discussions; and by the clear desire for professional identity to become ever more important in further education.

We believe that our key conclusions will add to the blueprint for which the Education and Training Foundation will have oversight in the sector in the coming years.
It remains for me to comment on the thinking generated by the seminar series, and so very helpfully described in this report, and to comment on how this thinking will be taken forward by The Education and Training Foundation and our partners.

But first, a big thank you to IfL for the role it has played in securing a place for discussion and debate and the development of our thinking around professionalism and standards in the education and training sector. Thanks to IfL we have seen broad engagement in this debate, from senior policymakers to classroom teachers and workplace tutors. Thank you also to the 157 Group and the Institute of Education for working with IfL to organise this excellent seminar series and for providing us at the Foundation with so much food for thought and validation of our approach.

This report ratifies the emphasis that the Foundation is giving to ensuring that the new Professional Standards are a foundation stone for everything that we do, and are reflected in the design of every programme through which we support the sector and its workforce. Mirroring the themes in this report, the Standards emphasise the importance of professional reflection; of practitioners developing and refining their own expertise and judgement in applying theory to practice; and of identifying where practice needs to improve in order to ensure best outcomes for learners.

Of course, those working in our sector cannot be expected to achieve these demanding standards on their own: practitioners need time, space and support, including the support of their managers, leaders and peers. This is why the Foundation’s work to improve professional and organisational practices is designed to ensure that time, space and support is incorporated.

We champion “research for the sector, by the sector” for our sector to be evidence-based in what it does, and aspire to be so too, drawing on what we know from our own and others’ work, about what makes for effective CPD. This is CPD that is more likely to engage and enthuse practitioners, and support them to improve their own practice, organisational practices, learner engagement and outcomes. We therefore design our programmes to include peer learning and practitioner-led activities, which legitimise practitioners’ having time for reflection, trying things out and sharing problems and learning with their colleagues. And we want to promote a culture that recognises that learning also results when things do not work out as expected.

Finally, we recognise that effective practice is “situated”; that there are no “one-size-fits-all” solutions. This is why the Foundation ensures that it has a bottom-up approach in much of its support, to ensure that practical solutions can be developed at grassroots level that will work in that context, and with those learners.

Encouraging collaborative action-research-based approaches means that identifying areas for improvement, and working through to solutions, is an ongoing process, in typical improvement cycle or action learning style. The longer-term legacy that we aim for, however, is what Professor Ann-Marie Bathemaker recently described at our first practitioner research conference as “not a quick fix but a slow burn”. In other words, we are supporting the sector to find solutions to their immediate improvement needs while at the same time they are developing the capacity, confidence and courage to be constructively critical about their own practices and those used by their organisations.

Our aim is, of course, to achieve better outcomes for learners and stronger relationships with employers. We know that the FE and training workforce is not sufficient in numbers, skills or confidence to meet many of the other challenges it faces without help. Our strategy is to address both recruitment and knowledge and skills development. We are focused on recruiting high-calibre graduates into the sector to teach English and maths, while building the subject knowledge, technology confidence and curriculum command of existing teachers across a spectrum, including those teaching learners with special educational needs and disabilities.

The Foundation has an ambitious priority to contribute to building a strong vocational education and training system overall, in which employers are integral, while supporting ongoing improvements in vocational teaching and learning. If we listen to the widest range of teachers and trainers across the education and training system about what they want from us as new custodians of their professional body and their professional status, we can design and deliver a world-class professional membership offer that supports individuals and institutions to be the very best they can. And that can only be good news for learners and employers.

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