

An Open Letter about the Integrated Learning Environment (ILE)

Officially announced in May of 2019, the Integrated Learning Environment (ILE) was intended as the crown jewel of the *Imagine* strategic plan. As the largest technical project in AU's history, it was intended to create a seamlessly unified platform that would substantially improve students' learning experiences.

As we approach an already delayed and significantly scaled back [initial launch](#), many AUFA professionals involved in different aspects of the ILE project feel compelled to raise our concerns about it. We do not take the decision to share these issues lightly. Many of us were enthusiastic early supporters and many more have gone above and beyond to try and make this project successful.

But, as the unfortunate reality of the project becomes more apparent each day, and as AU faces increasing uncertainty and likely budget cuts, we worry that pushing ahead with the ILE is extremely irresponsible. In short, we worry that the ILE will be an extremely expensive failure that will not deliver on its promises. If the project continues as planned, the newly implemented ILE systems will most likely increase expenses, complicate and compromise student service, and create extensive additional work for AU staff.

This letter is intended to provide some context for those in the AU community who would otherwise have no reason to doubt this project. To be clear, we are sharing these concerns because we want AU to succeed, and we see the ILE as a significant impediment to this success. We want to be excited about change and innovation, but this requires an environment of respect and trust for those who are directly responsible for the day-to-day work that keeps the internal workings of the university functioning.

What do you mean, a failure?

The official communications about the ILE have, understandably, painted the project in a very flattering light. However, a closer look at the project reveals a much more concerning picture.

Based on our understanding of the project, there seem to be several critical issues:

- Core aspects of the project were fundamentally flawed from the very beginning.
- Some promises made by vendors have turned out to be false.
- Transparent and effective communication has been severely limited, especially between different project silos.
- The scaled-back initial launch will limp ahead with many manual workarounds that will increase workloads for faculty and staff. There have been no clear assurances that this additional work will be temporary.
- Most importantly, it is becoming clear that **the student experience will not improve; instead, service standards will suffer.**



These are admittedly broad and general concerns. We have heard many different and specific concerns, but, unfortunately, we need to be cautious about sharing specific details as we do not want to put any individuals at risk of retaliation.

Further, many of the specific issues have been raised within multiple venues, including formal channels and up chains of command, yet they have largely been ignored or minimized. Any project is bound to encounter bumps along the road, but the ways in which these issues have accumulated over time paints an overall picture that is really very concerning.

How did we get here?

As you are likely very aware, AU's model of continuous enrolment is unique. This places specialist demands on any major IT systems that handle student data and courses. Understanding how our model works—in detail—and how it has been implemented to date in current systems is critical for planning their replacements. We can't simply purchase products and platforms built for a traditional semester system and hope for the best.

Rather than starting from careful, thoughtful exploratory work to clearly document exactly how things currently work and how systems might be improved or replaced, the ILE started at the end: a launch date intended to fit within the five-year timeframe of the *Imagine* strategic plan. A very early step was to seek vendors to provide solutions.

This approach demonstrates some of the key issues that have plagued the project from the beginning: unrealistic timelines, outsized expectations, and a reliance on external sources of expertise.

As the project progressed, another extremely troubling dynamic emerged: hostility to permanent internal staff, their ideas, and their expertise. Contractors with no institutional knowledge of AU were hired for key project roles. Internal experts were increasingly frozen out, and their valid and well-intentioned concerns ignored or dismissed as simple naysaying or resistance to change. This dynamic was exacerbated by an extremely mis-handled [re-organization of the IT department](#), which added completely unnecessary layers of complexity and confusion.

All of this has led to critical decisions about the ILE project being made in a vacuum without an appropriate level of understanding of AU's core operations.

As deadlines loom, many of these internal experts are now being brought in, only to find that significant issues, questions, and risks raised over several years have been ignored. A climate of toxic mistrust reigns, with staff discouraged from asking questions and actively prevented from working collaboratively to find solutions.

Who is to blame?

It's unfortunate that we feel compelled to address this question at all. We're not interested in pointing fingers simply to deflect from a shared responsibility. Yet there seems to be some very clear indications



that the problems stem from the project leadership—specifically, the AU Executive members involved in the Steering Committee.

It's difficult not to see patterns with the current AU Executive that have contributed to this unfortunate situation: lack of respect for staff and their expertise, arrogance about the infallibility of top-down initiatives, and overconfidence about technological solutions to issues facing the academy.

We find no fault with contractors, excluded managers, seconded staff, or any others who are simply trying their best to make this project work to the best of their ability. The problem is that the project was ill-conceived from the very beginning, then poorly managed from the top.

What can be done now?

We are sharing these concerns now because it is not too late to step back from this extremely problematic project. We hope that the leadership of AU will recognize that going ahead with the ILE as currently planned will create new risks and exacerbate existing challenges.

We urge the AU Executive, specifically President Peter Scott, to consider pausing, delaying, or even outright cancelling the planned ILE launches.

Further, we urge the AU Executive to provide **full and transparent financial disclosure** for the ILE, including both sunk costs as well as anticipated future costs that account for impacts on workload across all university faculties and departments.

Finally, if the ILE is to proceed in some form, we demand **transparent and detailed communication** about the specific project components and a **removal of any barriers to collegial problem-solving and collaboration across silos.**

We are committed to this university and its students. We are confident that, in an environment where internal staff are treated with trust and respect, we have the collective capacity to pivot, innovate, and improve our systems to better support students and our core mission of removing barriers to education.

But it is the university leadership that needs to initiate this pivot, as they are the ones who have created a toxic climate and introduced barriers to us being able to serve students to the best of our collective abilities. Faculty and staff need to start feeling valued and respected for us to unleash our collective potential.

What does this mean for me?

For our colleagues who are learning of these concerns for the first time, we ask for your trust and patience. The mismanagement of the ILE, alongside the continued impacts of the IT Optimization, is draining resources and energy from other crucial work. We ask that you trust that we are doing the best we can to keep the ship afloat despite constant and increasing challenges.

We also urge all AU employees to prioritize your own well-being and mental health. The ILE is only part of a larger picture of what seems to be widespread low morale and unsustainable workloads. If



unreasonable demands are being put on you, we encourage you to seek support from your union, supervisor, team members, and other colleagues to establish priorities and maintain clear boundaries around the time you spend on your work.

Respectfully,

AUFA professionals involved in the Integrated Learning Environment

Questions can be directed to president@aufa.ca.