OSH MANAGEMENT IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR - WHAT ARE EUROPEAN WORKPLACES TELLING US?
Webinar, 26 April 2023

Introduction

The Education sector is central to forming a skilled and productive workforce and to the advancement of society in general. According to 2021 figures from Eurostat, the sector provides employment to 7% of the EU workforce and, like all organisations, educational establishments face different types of occupational safety and health (OSH) risks that are related to their working practices, materials, environmental conditions and social relations. Some of these include musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), psychosocial risks, risks due to digitalisation and the recent transformation to working from home due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Given the importance of the sector, in 2022 the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) carried out a sectoral follow-up study of the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER). The main aims were to analyse the sector data across the three ESENER waves (2009, 2014 and 2019) to gain an overview of trends over time in OSH management in general, and psychosocial risks in particular, as well as the drivers and barriers to OSH management in the sector and the involvement of workers in OSH. The report forms part of a series of in-depth sectoral studies of ESENER.

Aiming to present the main findings of the study on Education, EU-OSHA organised a webinar on 26 April 2023: ‘OSH Management in the Education sector – what are European workplaces telling us?’. Experts from EU-OSHA, European Commission representatives and European Union (EU) education sectoral social partners presented at the webinar, which gathered over 90 participants.

Welcome and opening, EU-OSHA

Malgorzata Milczarek, Interim Head of the Prevention and Research Unit, EU-OSHA

- Welcome and thanks to participants for their interest in this event. The webinar is very important for EU-OSHA, not only because all workers in the education sector deserve healthy and safe working conditions, but also, due to the importance of the sector itself: as pointed out above, the education sector contributes to a skilled and productive European workforce and, more generally, to the good progress in terms of societal and economic developments. The webinar is also very timely in the context of the European Year of Skills, launched by the European Commission on 9 May 2023.
- EU-OSHA has been involved for many years in projects on mainstreaming OSH into education. We are also developing OIRA (Online interactive risk assessment) tools to support OSH management in the sector -specific presentation in this webinar- and, of course, in 2021-2022 we carried out the in depth study on OSH management in the education sector, based on the ESENER survey that will be presented and discussed today at this webinar.
- The education sector in the EU is very diverse, with different types and levels of education, different workplace sizes and national contexts. Some of the main issues are psychosocial risks, including work related stress and third-party violence, musculoskeletal disorders or noise. Education was also severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with accelerated digitalisation and necessary remote teaching that generated important challenges for all. These and other issues are to be discussed at the webinar.
European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER), EU-OSHA

Xabier Irastorza, Senior Research Project Manager, EU-OSHA

- ESENER provides data on how European workplaces manage OSH in practice. Carried out three times in five-year cycles (2009, 2014 and 2019), ESENER interviews over 45,000 workplaces across all activity sectors and business classes in more than 30 European countries. The target respondent is ‘the person most knowledgeable on how health and safety is managed at the workplace’.

- The main findings are covered in the presentation. ESENER provides comparable information across countries, sectors and business size classes on the management of OSH, including psychosocial risks, the main drivers and barriers to manage OSH and how workers are involved practically in the management of OSH.

- Following completion of the survey in 2019, EU-OSHA is carrying out a series of in-depth follow-up analyses on a variety of topics. By spring 2023 the reports of the following projects are already published:
  - Managing psychosocial risks in European micro and small enterprises: Qualitative evidence from ESENER 2019 — overview report, country reports, summary report.
  - ESENER 2019 Overview report.
  - Accommodation and food service activities – evidence from the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) — overview report, summary report.

- Another sectoral report, on Transportation and storage, is to be published late in 2023.

- All ESENER reports, including technical documents and national questionnaires, as well as a Data Visualisation tool translated into all languages covered in ESENER, are available at: https://visualisation.osha.europa.eu/esener/en

Education sector

Ioannis Anyfantis and Xabier Irastorza, Research Project Managers, EU-OSHA

- The ESENER sectoral study on Education complements an in-depth statistical analysis of the sector findings across the three survey waves with a literature review and interviews with key sector informants, in order to take account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. See additional details in the presentation.

- Workers in the sector are exposed to a wide range of OSH risks, including psychosocial risks (such as having to deal with difficult pupils or parents, offensive (violent) behaviour, time pressure,..), musculoskeletal disorders (prolonged sitting, repetitive hand or arm movements,..), and loud noise, among others.

- Very importantly, there has been an intensification of risks due to Covid-19 pandemic, particularly of digitalisation, psychosocial risks and MSDs.

- The sector is very broad and diverse and this has to be taken into account when analysing these findings as they of course differ by workplace size and specific education subsector, for example when it comes to the awareness of OSH risks.

- While workplaces in the sector report carrying out risk assessments slightly more frequently than the average across all sectors, their focus and scope represent some concern, as they are not as frequently as expected on MSDs and psychosocial risks.
In line with this, and looking at the evolution between 2014 and 2019, there was a decrease in the share of establishments in Education reporting the adoption of measures to prevent MSDs, despite the high reporting of MSDs in the sector.

There is a limited supply of teachers and poor staff retention, which is linked to the perception of the working environment in Education.

The important role of worker participation is acknowledged and, particularly, of health and safety representatives, whose presence is positively associated with the likelihood of carrying out risk assessments and discussing the potential impacts of digitalisation on OSH.

The discussion covered the following topics:

- Concerns over constant digital surveillance when using digital technologies. It was pointed out that there should be some consideration given to transparency when applying digital technologies so that users are aware of the type of data that is being collected and tracked. In this sense, platform work and algorithmic management of workers, along with many other issues, are to be covered in EU-OSHA’s 2023-2025 Healthy Workplaces Campaign ‘Safe and healthy work in the digital age’.

- The importance of loud noise as a risk factor in the sector and its links to the prevalence of diseases of the vocal cords, which is a well-documented OSH risk for teachers. Regarding protective measures, the insulation of classrooms and availability of drinking water, among others, were mentioned, as well as the need for the labour inspectorate to have the risk of loud noise in mind.

- There was a point on the ageing workforce in education and the challenges it will bring, not only in terms of OSH but also in attracting new workers to the sector. There was a point made precisely on the sector not being regarded to be particularly attractive and on the challenges to retain workers.

- Commitment in the private education sector to go beyond minimum OSH requirements and whether or not there is a difference vis-à-vis the public sector. The findings suggest that generally, more measures are taken among public workplaces, including worker representation, which is in any case linked to workplace size and national legal requirements.

- The use of digital devices was raised too, arguing that in several countries teachers had to resort to their own private equipment in order to carry out their tasks remotely. Even to this day there are teachers that have not been given work equipment by their employers, which, among others, leads to an increased perception of blurring boundaries between work and private life.

- The role of legislation was pointed out regarding how the EU could address the issue of its complexity, which was reported to be a major difficulty by 42% of workplaces in the EU-27 in ESENER 2019. Interestingly, the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2014-2020 already made a specific point on simplifying legislation. It is relevant to dig in further in the ESENER results though and see how this perception varies remarkably by country and also in time, often linked to changes in the legal framework -such changes probably driving the perception of the legal framework being difficult even though their (the changes) aim may have been precisely the simplification in the first place.

View from the European Commission

Francisco Jesús Alvarez, DG EMPL C.2 Health and Safety at Work

- The ESENER survey is of essential importance to the European Commission as it provides useful and reliable information on how OSH is managed across European workplaces in general and also in specific sectors. The EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027 contains a specific reference to ESENER 2019, proving its relevance for other stakeholders in the field of OSH.

- The information provided by the ESENER sectoral report on Education is very appreciated by the European Commission because it sheds light on the main risks reported in the sector, the approach taken by European establishments to manage OSH and the main drivers and barriers. The high reporting of
musculoskeletal disorders and psychosocial risks in the sector links directly with the EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027, where both issues are extensively addressed.

• The transformation of teaching due to digitalisation, largely brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the importance of health and safety representatives in this context, are duly covered in the report.
• The key role of the sector is obvious, as already mentioned by EU-OSHA colleagues, even more so in exceptional and challenging circumstances, as the ones experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a few days, thousands of teachers across Europe had to start teaching online, which required enormous effort, with obvious implications in terms of psychosocial risks and musculoskeletal disorders.
• In this context, the European Commission pays particular attention to improving OSH in the sector, dating back to previous Community strategies on health and safety at work since 2002. The work of EU-OSHA has been very important too, with their different projects and activities on the sector, such as the work on mainstreaming OSH into education. Currently, many EU Member States include topics on OSH in their education curricula.

• It is very important to highlight the European Year of Skills, launched on 9 May 2023 and that was announced by the President of the European Commission in her State of the Union speech in 2022. The green and digital transitions are opening up new opportunities for people but also for the EU economy and in this context, having the relevant skills empower people to successfully navigate labour market changes and to fully engage in society and in democracy. This will ensure that nobody is left behind and that the economic recovery, as well as the green and digital transition, are socially fair and just. A workforce with the appropriate skills that are in demand contributes to sustainable growth and leads to more innovation, as well as to improving the competitiveness of businesses.
• The European Commission is working very actively on the European Year of Skills with the key stakeholders, such as the European Parliament, the Member States, social partners, public and private employment services, Chambers of Commerce and Industry, education and training providers, as well as workers and companies. Everyone is together to meet the objectives of the European year. The European Commission will promote also upskilling and reskilling opportunities, for instance by highlighting relevant EU initiatives, including, the organisation of campaigns across the EU to support mutual learning.
• In this context of the European Year of Skills, the European Commission welcomes the contribution of EU.OSHA, which is very significant, for instance, including the 2023-2025 Healthy Workplaces Campaign ‘Safe and healthy work in the digital age’ and the OSHVET project, among others, as well as being one of the official partners.

View from the European sectoral social partners

Marie-Céline Falisse (EFEE, European Federation of Education Employers)

Martina di Rodolfo (ETUCE-CSEE. European Trade Union Committee for Education)

• OSH is one of the long-standing areas of cooperation in the European sectoral social dialogue committee Education and bearing in mind the importance of the topic, they selected a few macro areas to cover in their presentation: psychosocial risks, working conditions and the attractiveness of the teaching profession, violence and harassment, digitalisation and risk assessments.
• Regarding the issue of psychosocial risks in education, social partners strongly believe in the importance of healthy and safe working environments in order to ensure the psychosocial well-being of all the people working and studying in education institutions at all levels. It is essential to strive for supportive work environments in which school leaders, teachers and other education staff are well trained and motivated to perform to the best of their abilities. A positive psychosocial environment enhances good performance and personal development while also supporting everyone’s mental and physical well-being.
• Psychosocial risks are the main OSH risk factor and they emerge, together with the attractiveness of the profession, as a pressing issue in the context of OSH. The ESENER report highlights the emotional demands teachers have to deal with in the classroom, which have been proven to have a relationship with increasing levels of burnout and decreasing satisfaction in the teaching profession. This is also linked
with the evolving dynamics in the sector, with increasing expectations and demands for all education personnel - at the moment with a very pressing shortage of teachers, which is witnessed across almost all European countries. It is of utmost importance to provide adequate support to the profession to prevent and manage psychosocial risks.

- Thinking of the recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic, the European social partners have adopted a statement committing each other to develop a strategy covering psychosocial risks in education. They are about to launch a new social dialogue project, meaning both sides will be involved in addressing psychosocial risks in education in the aftermath of the pandemic, in view of assessing the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the teaching profession. They will not only look at Covid-19 as a disease but as a long-term driver of change in the world of work (such as increased digitalisation). Specific practices will be identified at national and regional level and based on them, three national case studies are to be conducted in Slovenia, Malta and Portugal, followed by a training seminar.

- Concerning **working conditions and attractiveness of the teaching profession**, the ESENER report pointed out that teachers feel their work to be a good job, showing that they have not lost the meaning of their job but at the same time, the education system across Europe is still struggling to recruit and retain highly qualified professionals, leading to a shortage of teachers. The ESENER report also touches upon working time, which is an issue in several countries as working time of teachers is not clearly defined - it goes beyond teaching time to include administrative tasks and correction of exams, among others. These tasks are not included within the formal working hours in several countries and end up being ‘invisible over time work’. Building on the impact of Covid-19, and linking it with working time, in the ESENER report the education sector was the highest scoring sector indicating not having enough time to get the job done.

- The European social partners have been working since 2022 on a project that aims to strengthen the capacity of European education employers through the promotion of innovation in education institutions, specifically in a post Covid-19 era. Several peer learning activities are being organised towards facilitating the exchange of knowledge and practices. The impact of Covid-19 has been significant and it has disrupted the learning and teaching environment throughout Europe and the world, but, on the other hand, it may have resulted in the introduction of innovation in the education sector, which the social partners think should be properly identified and upscaled, when relevant.

- The next topic, **violence and harassment** in education, is a very important issue to tackle. As mentioned in the ESENER report, the level of workplace violence in the education sector is above the average when compared to other sectors and, consequently, the sectoral social partners believe that a suitable policy framework with regards to tackling violence and harassment is essential. It should include a clear definition of violence and harassment along with appropriate information available to everyone: education staff, students, parents, and society in general. Violence and harassment cannot be tolerated and, if required, legal actions shall be taken. Clear and up to date information and consultation should be in place at any relevant stage if a difficult situation appears, as well as appropriate training for management and employees. There should also be clear policies on the support to be provided to anyone who has been exposed to harassment and/or violence.

- The value of the ESENER study emerges as a truly overarching report which is able to connect across different OSH issues. It highlights how violence can be both internal and external, also physical and verbal, and how it pans out depending on the context - physical but also virtual environment. They all relate to growing levels of burnout. We have seen increasing violence in the last decade in the education sector, and Covid-19 seems to have acted as a trigger for increasing violent behaviours against teachers.

- Since 2010 the European social partners have engaged in a common effort to tackle, in particular, third-party violence in the workplace. The world of work has changed profoundly and the effectiveness of the guidelines that were produced have to be re-assessed.

- **Digitalisation** is a topic of growing importance and interest. The sectoral social partners are about to start the implementation of a project that aims to acquire a better understanding of the evolution and management of teachers’ working time in the context of digitalisation and the green transition. The project shall showcase good practices of teachers’ working time in different countries, while looking deeper into each context, spotting challenges and opportunities, and identifying possible solutions.
Education needed to adapt radically and quickly to the new settings of Covid-19 and new ways of teaching and learning emerged during the pandemic, which are probably here to stay. But it is important to analyse what has worked during the pandemic and what needs some adaptation and corrections. Digitalisation in education comes with the potential to theoretically reduce the workload of teachers - fewer administrative tasks, for instance - but over the last years the administrative burden of teachers has actually increased. It is also relevant to point out that digitalisation in education is mostly external to the actual education institution, meaning there is a subcontracting that may lead to increased dependency and the collection of big amounts of data - both from students and teachers - by these providers, which poses several issues, not only in terms of privacy and data protection but also in terms of workload being managed by algorithms. The sectoral social partners are looking forward to EU-OSHA’s forthcoming 2023-2025 Healthy Workplaces Campaign ‘Safe and healthy work in the digital age’.

A joint project has been conducted between 2020 and 2022, called E-Speed. It was conceived before the Covid-19 outbreak but they had the opportunity to include the concrete impact the pandemic was having on the education sector. The aim of the project is to maximise the opportunities of digitalisation while minimising risks for both employers and workers and identifying best practices. The main issues identified included cyberviolence and cyber harassment, psychosocial risks, technostress, the right to disconnect and privacy concerns.

Finally, regarding risk assessment, the social partners in Education have been actively involved for some time in developing European risk assessment tools for the education sector under EU-OSHA’s OiRA (Online interactive Risk Assessment). It is an activity through which the value of cooperation between unions and employer representatives emerges, and the work done with EU-OSHA has allowed social partners to implement risk assessment at a national level. A specific tool on early childhood education and secondary education has been developed. Those using the tool can create an action plan, download a report with an overview of the risks and the measures, which is essential to the social partners.

These tools have been promoted via two interactive online workshops under the OSH4EDU project (2020-2021), whose aim was to raise awareness about the possibilities of implementing an OiRA tool into national settings, but also to share knowledge, experience and challenges between education employers and trade union representatives on the use of risk assessment tools, and at the same time, explore the possibility to develop a tool for higher education and research, and for vocational education and training. In 2023-2024, the European sectoral social partners together with EU-OSHA will continue their cooperation to jointly create an OiRA tool for higher education and research. Like the previous tool, this will also serve as a model tool for risk assessment to be adapted at the national level.

**EU-OSHA’s OiRA (Online Interactive Risk Assessment)**

**Julia Flintrop, Michaela Seifert, Research Project Managers, EU-OSHA**

EU-OSHA’s OiRA has been available for developing risk assessment tools for more than 10 years now. The education sector is represented with a total of 18 tools, several of them directly based on the EU model tools that have been developed by the sectoral social dialogue committee in cooperation with EU-OSHA, as mentioned by the sectoral social partners in their presentation. Based on a Dutch tool (RI&E), the aim of OiRA is to facilitate conducting risk assessment in order to fulfil the legal obligation. Even though in ESENER the number of workplaces reporting carrying out risk assessments in the education sector is higher than in other sectors, there are still workplaces that do not carry out risk assessments. The reasons they report refer to not having any problems or knowing the risks already, which we know is often rather a sign of a lack of awareness. Bearing this in mind, OiRA aims to improve the situation and facilitate the risk assessment process.

OiRA is provided for free and everybody can login and use it. It is anonymous and hence, no data of the individual risk assessments and accounts are revealed. OiRA tools are built on a modular approach, where modules normally refer to certain activities or areas of work (e.g. in the education tools that could be teaching activities and class rooms; building and facilities; science, technology, arts & crafts). One of the advantages is that users are already provided with predefined solutions that they can select or they can insert their own solutions. In a second step they can then download different reports that help them to follow up with the implementation of the solutions.
The action plan produced by OiRA, which in many countries is officially recognised by the Labour Inspectorate, is a proof that the workplace has fulfilled its legal obligation to carry out a risk assessment.

- The main target group of OiRA are small and medium sized enterprises. However, two approaches to develop OiRA tools can be distinguished. On the one hand there are national tools that include direct links to national legislation and are provided in the national language. On the other hand, there are EU tools, that are developed together with the EU social partners of the specific sector. These tools are considered to be module tools that can be used as a blueprint for national tools.

- With the EU social partners, EU-OSHA normally establishes a Steering Committee, which includes experts nominated by the sectoral social partners. In the particular case of the new OiRA tool under development for higher education and research, the first steering committee meeting took place on 14 June 2023 to start preparing the structure and working on the content. The sectoral social partners are the owners of the content of the EU tools and EU-OSHA facilitates the process by putting the data and the software at the disposal of the users, as well as providing expert support and advice on the content. It is precisely at the meetings when the content is discussed and agreed between the partners. Each tool is then going through a final testing done by establishments before it is officially published and launched.

- Since Covid-19 EU-OSHA has taken an additional approach developing EU tools for specific risks or activities, such as the EU Covid-19 tool, which has turned out to be a big success (however it has been taken offline when the pandemic has officially been declared as finalised). EU-OSHA is continuing this approach and is about to publish a tool on third-party party violence and one on telework.

- The education sector is very active in OiRA and EU-OSHA is very happy about the good cooperation with the sectoral social dialogue partners. Education as such also plays a broader role in other OiRA sectoral tools. There are for example countries where the use of OiRA is included in the education curricula and EU-OSHA has developed a training feature to enable the use of OiRA for training in different settings (in the company but also in vocational education and training).

- There are currently (June 2023) 334 OIRA tools and more than 318,000 risk assessments. The role of social partners in promoting and disseminating the tools is essential and the Education social partners are extremely active.

- EU-OSHA continuously works on the software, carrying out updates and maintenance and developing new features based on requests from OiRA partners. The feedback from partners reflects these developments as positive and useful and a recent study with OiRA users also proved that the software and its tools meet the needs of users.

- Bearing in mind the ESENER results showing the importance of worker involvement in the management of OSH, the OIRA software now also enables employers to invite employees to participate in the risk assessment (multiuser feature).

Following the presentation, there was a question on the availability of the new features in English, especially the training feature. While the training feature is already available in all EU tools, it can be further elaborated by adding a small “test” to the end user at the end of the training. This kind of test needs to be developed for each tool and currently EU-OSHA is working on a proposal for the educational tools, which was presented to the steering group on 14 June.

Closing remarks

Xabier Irastorza, Senior Research Project Manager, EU-OSHA

- Fieldwork for the next wave of ESENER will be taking place in 2024. EU-OSHA will be comparing the findings with those of previous waves but new items will be included in the questionnaire, covering issues such as the impact of Covid-19 in the management of OSH.

- While this specific ESENER project on Education is concluded, EU-OSHA will still be very active on topics of interest for the education sector. Further to the ongoing work on OiRA, as presented in the webinar, there is the forthcoming OSH Overview on psychosocial risks as well as the 2023-2025 Healthy Workplaces Campaign ‘Safe and healthy work in the digital age’. The next Healthy Workplaces Campaign, starting in 2026, will focus on psychosocial risks, which renders strong room for cooperation.

http://osha.europa.eu