



Management of occupational safety and health in the education sector

Introduction



Occupational safety and health (OSH) in the education sector has to be managed. This can be done in several ways, but in all models there are the same core steps:

- plan the assessment in consultation with the workforce;
- identify the hazards;
- decide who may be harmed, how, and where;
- assess the level of risk and decide on action;
- take action to eliminate or reduce the risk;
- monitor and review the actions.

Risks to health and safety in education may affect not only employees, but also pupils, students, and visitors. This factsheet is for everyone who is involved in the process of managing occupational safety and health, including head teachers, teaching and other school staff, health and safety representatives, and relevant external safety and health services. It is intended for workplaces where teaching is performed, from kindergarten to university.

Legislation

Council Directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989, on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work, is sometimes referred to as the 'framework directive'. This directive, transposed into law in all Member States, contains a number of requirements⁽¹⁾.

- Employers must assess all the risks to workers' health and safety. In the light of the results obtained from this assessment, employers must take any measures needed to prevent occupational risks.
- Every employer has to ensure the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to the work.
- Employees are entitled to be consulted by their employer.
- Workers are entitled to receive adequate and specialised training in matters relating to health and safety.
- Employees are also responsible for cooperation on OSH issues and compliance with such measures.

The risk management process

Plan your assessment

A thorough risk assessment takes time, and it is important to plan your assessment so that all activities that occur in the workplace are covered⁽²⁾.

Identify the hazards

Think about the work that is done and what materials, equipment, and chemicals are used. Cover all relevant issues. Assess the work conditions for anything that has the potential to cause harm. It is important that the examination is as wide-ranging as possible, so that all hazards are included. Attention must be paid to the fact that pupils and visitors may also be harmed by the same hazards that threaten staff. Harm can occur from:

- violence from pupils and parents to staff;
- poor design of classroom furniture and equipment causing musculoskeletal disorders;
- hot surfaces in school kitchens;
- biological agents in university laboratories;
- construction hazards during building work.

The following approaches may help identify trouble spots:

- think by geographical area (e.g. classroom by classroom);
- think by type of hazard (e.g. physical, chemical, biological, psychosocial);
- think by job (e.g. caretaker, cleaner, secretary, teacher);
- think about how the school or college is organised (e.g. work scheduling);
- check records (e.g. the accident book) to identify problems;
- ask the workers and those affected.

Hazard, risk, and harm

- A hazard is anything that can cause harm.
- The risk is the likelihood of harm being done.
- Harm is a negative safety and health consequence (e.g. injury, or ill health).

Decide who may be harmed, how, and where

Think about everyone who may be hurt. This means not just employees, but also contractors, self-employed persons, students and pupils, and visitors. Consider who and how many may be harmed, and how.

Assess the level of risk

Evaluate how likely it is that the hazard will result in harm or injury, and how severe that injury is likely to be. Consider what control measures are currently in place and whether they are sufficient. The focus for cost-effective and sustainable risk management should be on collective protection and preventive measures.

If someone is likely to be harmed:

- can the hazard be removed completely?
- can the risk be reduced or controlled (e.g. by substituting a hazard for something less hazardous)?

⁽¹⁾ Employment and Social Affairs DG, European Commission. http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/health_safety/intro/framedir_en.htm

⁽²⁾ See Facts 46 — Occupational safety and health in the education sector.



- can protective measures be taken to protect all the persons exposed?
- is personal protective equipment needed to protect the worker when collective measures do not provide sufficient protection?

Responsibilities for risk assessment

The level at which risk assessments will be made and risk management will take place will vary depending on Member State and type of institution. It is not possible to have a generic risk assessment as specific hazards and risks in individual establishments should be addressed.

The person assigned to carry out the risk assessment should have knowledge of both the risk assessment process and the establishment concerned. The involvement of the workforce is vital.

Take action

Risk assessment is the first step to successful risk management. It is not possible to manage health and safety successfully without a suitable risk assessment. After completing the risk assessment, list the preventive measures needed in order of priority, then take action, involving the workers and their representatives in the process. Targeting the underlying problems is the most cost-effective way for risk management.

Interventions should be agreed with the workforce (either directly or through worker safety representatives). The agreed solutions should be carefully implemented, monitored and evaluated. The information arising from the risk assessment must be shared with the appropriate persons.

Employee involvement

Consulting the workforce is a legal requirement, and helps to ensure that workers are committed to safety and health procedures and improvements. Using their knowledge helps to ensure hazards are correctly spotted and workable solutions implemented. Worker representatives have an important role in this process. Employees must be consulted on health and safety measures and before the introduction of new technology or products.

Monitor and review

Assess the effectiveness of the control measures, ensure that the risks have been appropriately reduced and that other hazards have not been created.

Ways of working change, and so do hazards and risks. When a significant change takes place, check to make sure that there are no new hazards that need addressing. Repeat the risk assessment when necessary.

It is important to perform an evaluation as a way to assess which aspects of the interventions were successful and which not, and to see what works best for the specific educational establishment.

Specific risk assessments

Some specific risk assessments may be required for different risks that arise from particular work tasks. These apply to

staff in the education sector just as to other groups of workers. The requirements of such specific regulations should be also considered when general risk assessments are carried out. For the education sector, this may apply particularly to dangerous substances (biological and chemical agents) and musculoskeletal disorders (back pain and working with display screen equipment). National legislation based on Council Directive 94/33/EC of 22 June 1994 on the protection of young people at work may also be relevant, particularly where work experience schemes are operated.

Risk assessment and risk management should not overlook hazards to the safety and health of specific groups of staff. For example, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and persons with disabilities may have specific problems that require different solutions.

It is common for work by external contractors to be carried out in educational establishments. This work, particularly building work, may be considered relatively low risk in other workplaces, but can be high risk on educational sites. Close liaison and good communication between the contractor and the person in control of the establishment is required.

Further information

The web site of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work is at <http://agency.osha.eu.int>

The Agency's material on preventing psychosocial risks at work is at <http://osha.eu.int/ew2002/>

The Agency's material on good safety and health practice in the education sector is at http://europe.osha.eu.int/good_practice/sector/education/

Factsheets from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Agency factsheets in all Community languages are available free of charge to download from <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/factsheets/>

Facts 4 — *Preventing work-related musculoskeletal disorders*

Facts 13 — *Successful management to prevent accidents*

Facts 14 — *Preventing work-related slips, trips, and falls*

Facts 22 — *Work-related stress*

Facts 24 — *Violence at work*

Facts 31 — *Practical advice for workers on tackling work-related stress and its causes*

Facts 32 — *How to tackle psychosocial issues and reduce work-related stress*

Facts 46 — *Occupational health and safety in the education sector*

Facts 47 — *Prevention of violence to staff in the education sector*