



## Occupational safety and health in the education sector

### Introduction

Educational establishments can have the same hazards as any other workplace. However, the educational workplace is shared with students or pupils. These people can be vulnerable, being young, inexperienced, and often ignorant of safety and health hazards. They can also be a hazard in themselves.

### Safety and health management

Employers are required to evaluate the risks to the safety and health of workers and take action to prevent or control those risks <sup>(1)</sup>. This process can be broken down into a series of steps:

- plan your 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.

This factsheet describes some common hazards and risks in an educational workplace, with some suggestions on prevention, but given the breadth of the sector and the brevity of the factsheet, not all hazards can be covered. Activities such as school trips and recreational activities (e.g. sports) are not covered by this factsheet but may need to be covered by the risk assessment <sup>(2)</sup>.

### A safe working environment

An educational establishment should be a safe and healthy workplace and learning environment. To achieve this, the risk assessment should consider the design, layout, and construction of the working environment. Particular care should be taken when vulnerable groups are present on site (e.g. the very young) and consideration should be given to the needs of persons with disabilities.

#### Five to watch

- Indoor workplaces, whether classroom, staffroom, or kitchen should have suitable ventilation, lighting, humidity, and space, and should be kept clean.
- If vehicles are entering the premises, there should be clear routing and where possible the segregation of pedestrians from vehicles.
- Floor surfaces should be well maintained and kept clean to reduce the risk of slips and trips.
- Particular care should be taken over fall protection from areas such as balconies and stairwells. Extra edge protection may be needed to protect very young children.
- Transparent windows and doors should be clearly marked and constructed of suitable material.

### Slips and trips

Slips and trips are amongst the most common types of accident, and in educational establishments, where there can be many young persons moving in a relatively small space, the risk is greater than other workplaces. The causes of slips and trips should be considered as part of the risk assessment. These can be broken down into a number of risk factors <sup>(3)</sup>:

- environmental (e.g. the floor surface);
- contamination (e.g. water spilt on floor);
- organisational (e.g. lack of cleaning systems);
- footwear; and
- individual factors (e.g. workers with disabilities).

### Maintenance

The maintenance and repair of education buildings can involve external contractors. There should be clear communication between school and contractor to ensure the safety of both workers and pupils. Contractors should be aware of the added risks of working in educational establishments, and school staff should be instructed in the steps to keep students away from the work area.

To reduce the risk of transport accidents, deliveries should be timed so that vehicles are not at the workplace at times when pupils are entering or leaving the premises.

Day-to-day maintenance-related work, such as cleaning and minor repairs should also be considered. Workers and students should be protected from any specific hazards (e.g. toxic cleaning fluids). Safe storage of substances and tools can be of particular importance.

### Fire safety and emergency planning

Appropriate fire precautions should be taken in every educational establishment, with evacuation procedures tested regularly, escape routes signposted, and fire extinguishers and similar equipment inspected. Emergency procedures should exist for occurrences such as accidents in school workshops and on playing fields.

### Health and safety in laboratories and workshops

Laboratories and workshops are where pupils are most likely to be exposed to risks from dangerous substances and machinery. The level of education will greatly influence the type of hazard and degree of risk, but there are some common issues.

- Written instructions should be clearly displayed and safety rules emphasised.
- Safety instructions should be given orally and posted at the start of each experiment.
- Teachers should set good safety examples with their behaviour.
- There should be sufficient supervision at all times.
- Anyone operating a machine should be fully aware of the instructions for use and all maintenance and health and safety requirements.

<sup>(1)</sup> Council Directive 89/391 of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work, transposed into law in all Member States.

<sup>(2)</sup> See Facts 45 — *Management of occupational safety and health in the education sector*.

<sup>(3)</sup> *Education information sheet 2 — Preventing slip and trip incidents in the education sector*. Health and Safety Executive. United Kingdom. <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/edis02.pdf>



- Suitable personal protective equipment and work clothes should be worn.
- Machinery and tools should be checked and maintained regularly.
- Dangerous substances, tools, and equipment should be safely stored to prevent unauthorised use.
- The laboratory or workshop should be kept clean, with equipment well maintained.
- Appropriate first aid equipment, for example emergency showers, should be provided for use in the event of an emergency.

National legislation based on Council Directive 94/33/EC of 22 June 1994 on the protection of young people at work may be relevant, particularly for work experience schemes.

### Musculoskeletal disorders

Manual handling involves the movement of heavy loads by hand or bodily force, and should be avoided. In the education sector, there is a particular risk of injury where children are being lifted. Work-related upper limb disorders can arise from poor ergonomic design of workplaces and workstations, for example during prolonged computer work in the school office.

#### The European prevention approach <sup>(4)</sup>

- Avoid musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) risks.
- Evaluate MSD risks that cannot be avoided.
- Combat MSD risks at source.
- Adapt work to the individual.
- Adapt to technical progress.
- Replace the dangerous with the non-dangerous or less dangerous.
- Develop a coherent overall prevention policy.
- Collective preventive measures take priority over individual protective measures.
- Give appropriate instruction and training to workers.

### Stress

Work-related stress is experienced when the demands of the work environment exceed the workers' ability to cope with (or control) them. It is not a disease, but can lead to mental and physical ill-health. Work-related stress is a symptom of an organisational problem, not an individual weakness. Reports indicate that over a quarter of all workers in the European Union believe that work-related stress affects their health <sup>(5)</sup>. A heavy workload can contribute to work-related stress.

#### Seven steps to stress prevention

- Adequate risk analysis
- Thorough planning of preventive actions
- A combination of work-orientated and worker-orientated measures
- Context-specific solutions
- Using appropriate external expertise
- Effective social dialogue, partnership, and worker involvement
- Sustained preventive actions and top management support

<sup>(4)</sup> Based on directive 89/391.

<sup>(5)</sup> *Third European Survey on Working Conditions 2000*. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Luxembourg. 2001.

### Violence

Violence at work is any incident where a person is abused, threatened, or assaulted at their work, and which endangers their safety, health, well-being, or work performance. It covers insults, threats, or physical or psychological aggression exerted by people from outside the organisation against a person at work. There may be a racial or sexual dimension to the violence. Workers in the education sector can also find themselves victims of violence because aggressors see them as 'representatives' of the system.

Workers are more at risk of violence when their jobs involve:

- dealing directly with pupils and/or their guardians;
- working late or alone;
- making off-site or home visits; or
- working with pupils with special needs.

### Bullying

Bullying can be defined as repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee, or group of employees, that creates a risk to health and safety. Unlike violence, that usually comes from outside, bullying occurs between colleagues. Bullying is best addressed by both creating an organisational culture with standards and values against bullying, and improving the psychosocial work environment, for example by avoiding unclear role and task specifications.

### 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 good safety and health practice in the education sector is at [http://europe.osha.eu.int/good\\_practice/sector/education/](http://europe.osha.eu.int/good_practice/sector/education/)

### Factsheets from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Factsheets in all EU 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 45 — *Management of occupational safety and health in the education sector*

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