

Healthy workplace, healthy workforce, better business delivery

Improving service delivery in universities and colleges through better occupational health



*This is a web-friendly
version of leaflet
MISC743*

'I want to see well-managed, healthy universities and colleges with well-motivated, healthy staff. I know good practice exists, the challenge is to make sure it becomes embedded across the whole of the higher education sector.'

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath,
Minister responsible for
health and safety

The workplace has a significant impact on people's health and well-being. Poor management of workplace health can lead to work-related ill health and to high levels of sickness absence. This gives real cause for concern, not least because of the costs involved, the impact on service delivery and the consequences for individual staff. Sickness absence is a key business issue, and it is a key indicator of how well an organisation is managed.

Universities and colleges need healthy and well-motivated workers if they are to deliver high-quality services. Effectively managing occupational health is key to achieving this.

'None of us doubts the negative effects of smoking, excessive alcohol consumption or obesity on health, but few of us have any understanding of the value of work to an individual's health. Work is important not only to physical and mental health, but also for social integration. People are diminished by the experience of long-term sickness absence; loss of contact with the world of work means they lose skills and confidence in returning to work.'

Professor Dame Carol Black, National Director for Health and Work

Committing resources to prevent people being made ill by work, or being absent from the workplace for health reasons, and placing an emphasis on rehabilitation and getting people back to work can benefit both employers and employees.

A major survey of sickness absence trends* has demonstrated a clear link between addressing sickness absence and improved business performance.

'Those companies who still put this issue in the "too difficult" tray would do well to sit up and take note of the very real benefits they would reap from tackling the problem.'

EEF Chief Medical Adviser and Health and Safety Commissioner,
Professor Sayeed Khan

To deliver these benefits we must:

- create workplaces where health, safety and well-being is protected and promoted;
- ensure staff have access to competent occupational health advice and support;
- improve access to preventative care and treatment for common health problems;
- enable people to remain in work while health problems are investigated and treated; and
- support and engage healthcare professionals on return-to-work issues.

* Sickness absence and rehabilitation survey EEF 2006

This is high on the Government's agenda. The Health, Work and Well-being (HWWB) strategy, a joint initiative between the Department of Health, Department for Work and Pensions and the Health and Safety Executive, encourages good management of occupational health and improved opportunities for people to recover from illness while at work. The work of the Ministerial Task Force for Health, Safety and Productivity supports HWWB by making sure that the public sector leads by example.

This may seem like a difficult challenge, but the solutions are not 'rocket science', they are at the heart of what well-managed organisations do.

How to do it

Occupational health is about how work and the work environment can affect an employee's health and equally how an employee's health can affect their ability to do the job.

The Council has seen a 59% reduction in the number of total days lost between 2001 and 2004 as a result of visible and sustained leadership from the Chief Executive Officer, who has proactively and visibly supported initiatives to tackle this issue.

Buckinghamshire County Council

A very straightforward approach can be taken to effective management of occupational health to help deliver reductions in sickness absence. It needs:

- Sustained **leadership** from managers at the top level. Without it, an organisation will not be motivated to take action. Institutions where the vice chancellor makes it clear that managing occupational health, safety and sickness absence is a key priority will be the institutions that really get things done.
- A good **occupational health service**. Investing in improved and more proactive occupational health arrangements can deliver efficiency savings in a relatively short timescale. A proactive occupational health service and a healthy and supportive working environment play an important part in preventing both work-related ill health and in proactively managing common health problems in order to help employees remain in work.
- **Training** and **support** for line managers, because their relationships with their teams are what can make a real difference.
- Regular, supportive **contact** with those who are absent due to sickness. This can have a major impact on an individual's motivation to get back to work.
- The right **systems and data** to support better absence management. To effectively manage occupational health and safety, and reduce the time lost to sickness absence, institutions will need to have systems for recording up-to-date and accurate sickness absence data that operate in real time, and allow sickness to be broken down by area and cause on a regular basis. This real-time reporting enables you to proactively target specific action to problem areas, and is the best way to measure progress towards tackling sickness absence.

This approach is bearing fruit. The CBI/AXA** survey on sickness absence shows an 'overall fall in absence levels in the public sector'. The evidence suggests that the measures being implemented are responsible for helping to drive down absence rates. But there is more to do.

** *Absence minded: Absence and labour turnover* CBI/AXA 2006

The hospital has successfully tackled sickness absence caused by musculoskeletal problems. Investing in an initiative to fast-track employees to physiotherapy services has resulted in a reduction of 1674 days lost in the first year. A 300% return on investment has been achieved by this initiative.
West Sussex Hospital

Prevention is better than cure

Tackling sickness absence itself is only one side of the coin. It is far better if the problem is prevented from occurring in the first place. This is the philosophy behind the work of the Ministerial Task Force.

Work-related ill health accounts for some 28 million working days lost a year in Great Britain. By far the biggest cause of this – up to half of all work-related absence in the education sector – is stress and related mental health issues. Stress has to be tackled if significant improvements in attendance and productivity are to be made. HSE's Stress Management Standards are part of a tried and tested methodology that can be applied to work-related stress in the higher education sector.

The standards are designed to help organisations look at the underlying causes of workplace stress, focus on the 'hotspots' where it is most prevalent, and tackle it. They are recommended by the University and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA) guidance *Preventing and tackling stress at work* as the safest and simplest way of managing work-related stress. Through these standards, new cases of work-related stress can be prevented and the problem of sickness absence reduced. Not only will tackling stress improve the health and well-being of your most valuable asset, your people, it will also deliver efficiencies as a result.

The Stress Management Standards are available online at:
www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm.

'The indicator tool at the heart of HSE's Management Standards approach is simple to understand and relatively easy to use. Have a look at the help and advice on work-related stress that HSE has to offer – it's free!'
Sheffield College

'Once we agreed that the Management Standards process must be incorporated into everyday work, it worked very well. We have already seen an increase in staff motivation and can see the potential for long-term rewards.'
Coleg Glan Hafren

'The questionnaire ties in well with good management practices. The process has worked well and has improved trust with staff and the unions. It has been a very positive experience for all involved.'
De Montfort University

Occupational health services

Good occupational health services are central to the effective management of workplace health. They can:

- protect and promote the health and well-being of the working population, creating a healthier workplace and a healthier workforce which will also protect and enhance your image and reputation as a good employer;
- provide early intervention to help prevent staff being absent for health-related reasons, and improved opportunities for people to recover from illness while at work;
- provide critical support to the process of effective absence management and increase the number of staff returning to work earlier;
- fulfil the statutory requirement to have access to 'competent' occupational health advice as part of the organisational arrangements to ensure that the health of staff and others is not adversely affected by their work.

New guidance for senior managers in higher and further education, entitled *Occupational health services in higher and further education*, has been developed with occupational health professionals, safety professionals and employer and employee representatives working in the higher and further education sectors. It advises on assessing your occupational health needs, matching an occupational health service to those needs, and what you can expect from a comprehensive occupational health service.

As a result of occupational health programmes on case management of long-term sickness absence, work-related sickness absence levels in 2005/06 were reduced to 5.6 days per person for police officers and 8.4 days per person for police staff. This realised a saving of £250 000 on 2004/05.
Humberside Police

Time to take action

Creating a healthy workplace and a healthy workforce is the best way to position your university/college to better deliver services.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you know what the sickness absence situation is in your university/college?
- Do you know what the cost of sickness absence is to your university/college?
- Do you positively promote good occupational health management?
- Could you do more to reduce sickness absence and improve your service delivery through better occupational health management?
- Are you aware of the sources of help available?

Vice chancellors should commit to providing:

- resources to find out what the problem is in their university/college;
- better training and support for managers to deal with sickness absence;
- resources for providing comprehensive and competent occupational health services.

We all have the same aim: to see well-managed universities and colleges with well-motivated, healthy staff.

Further information

The following guidance focuses on what organisations can do to monitor sickness absence, manage it if it happens, tackle the causes of it and promote a culture that encourages attendance.

HSE guidance

Managing sickness absence in the public sector. A joint review by the Ministerial Task Force for Health, Safety and Productivity and the Cabinet Office
Cabinet Office, DWP and HSE 2004 www.hse.gov.uk/gse/sickness.pdf

Ministerial Task Force for Health, Safety and Productivity: 'One year on' report
Cabinet Office, DWP and HSE 2005 www.hse.gov.uk/gse/oneyearon.pdf

Managing sickness absence and return to work: An employer's and manager's guide HSG249 HSE Books 2004 ISBN 0 7176 2882 5

Managing sickness absence and return to work in small businesses Leaflet INDG399 HSE Books 2004 (single copy free or priced packs of 20 ISBN 0 7176 2914 7) Web version: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg399.pdf

Off work sick and worried about your job? Steps you can take to help your return to work Leaflet INDG397 HSE Books 2004 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 0 7176 2915 5) Web version: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg397.pdf

Tackling stress: The Management Standards approach Leaflet INDG406 HSE Books 2005 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 6140 7) Web version: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg406.pdf

Occupational health services in higher and further education HSG257 HSE Books 2006 ISBN 0 7176 6194 6

UCEA guidance

Preventing and tackling stress at work: An approach for higher education UCEA 2006

University Health and Safety Management: Code of Best Practice UCEA 2001 ISBN 0 9532431 3 3

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This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

This leaflet is available online at: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/misc743.pdf

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