

## UCU stress toolkit

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# 1. Stress at work – the case for action

Work-related stress is a well-known hazard in our workplaces. The **TUC 13th biennial survey of union safety reps** confirmed that, with the exclusion of Covid-19, stress is the most widespread concern cited by 70% of survey respondents. *'In fact, stress – or 'stress or overwork' as the hazard was categorised before 2010 - has been the most commonly selected major concern since the series of surveys began in 1998, when overwork or stress' was picked out by 77 per cent of respondents.'* In education, stress was cited as the number one hazard by 81% of union safety reps, closely followed by overwork (61%), long hours (50%), bullying / harassment (46%) and harassment / violence / verbal abuse (29%).

In December 2020, a UCU survey of all members in post-16 education found that 85% of respondents were experiencing an increased level of stress due to changes in working practices associated with the pandemic. Overall, respondents reported that their mental wellbeing had been negatively impacted (a little or a lot) as a result of the following: increased workload (85%); lack of work-life balance (80%); lockdown / self-isolation (77%); move to online working (71%); lack of support from their employer (60%); return to face-to-face working following lockdown (51%); move to online working (71%); lack of access to healthcare (36%); lack of access to other support services (36%). Notably, only 30% of survey respondents felt that their employers approach to risk assessment during the pandemic had been satisfactory in relation to protecting their mental health and well-being.

Employers must provide a safe working environment for their staff and all those coming into contact with their business. They have a legal duty to undertake risk assessments to control workplace risks to low levels. They must identify potential workplace stressors and implement protective and preventative measures as part of this process.

If employers want to create a healthy a working environment where all workers have the opportunity to thrive they should take measures to prevent stress and promote healthy working practices.

*'As health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity but a positive state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (WHO, 1986), a healthy working environment is one in which there is not only an absence of harmful conditions but an abundance of health promoting ones.'*

(World Health Organisation, **Occupational health: Stress at the workplace**)

## 2. Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Stress Management Standards Approach

The HSE Stress Management Standards approach is an organisation wide, preventative approach to tackling the causes of work related stress. While employers do not have to follow this approach, it will enable employers to demonstrate that they are meeting their legal responsibilities and protecting workers from harm while at work.

There are six stress management standards that have been identified as the main drivers of stress at work:

1. **Demands** - includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment
2. **Control** – includes how much say people have in the way they do their work
3. **Support** - includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues
4. **Relationships** - includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
5. **Role** – includes whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles
6. **Change** – includes how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation

See: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>

The HSE have a free **step by step workbook** that employers can utilise to systematically capture actual and potential workplace stressors in an organisation and control them to low levels through the risk assessment process.

Many organisations have adopted the HSE management standards approach and the TUC have also developed guidance to support safety reps in their work to encourage employers to implement these standards in their workplaces

See: '**Tackling Workplace Stress Using the HSE Stress Management Standards: Guidance for health and safety representatives**'

### 3. The risk assessment process

A risk assessment approach is at the heart of any plan to reduce the risk of work-related stress and ensuring a healthy working environment.

While individual risk assessments can be requested for members who are experiencing work related stress, the approach taken here is to emphasise the employer's duty to tackle the underlying causes of stress by completing a generic, preventative stress risk assessment that can be implemented across the organisation.

The health and safety approach to stress is not about an individual's susceptibility to stress related ill health, but about the employer's responsibility to protect employees from work related harm. The symptoms that members experience are the effects of stress not the underlying causes.

#### Legal framework

Employers must operate within the legal framework in the UK to ensure employees are safe and protected from harm while at work. They have a legal duty to consult with trade union health and safety reps in recognised workplaces on all significant safety matters under the **Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations (SRSCR) 1977**, also known as the 'Brown Book'.

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires employers to take a precautionary approach to health and safety in the interests of all who may come into contact with their undertaking. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 detail how employers must conduct suitable and sufficient risk assessments, following **principles of prevention** to avoid or mitigate against any potential risks to workers health, safety and welfare.

Following a systematic approach to risk assessment will allow employers to:

- identify the main causes of work related stress in the organisation
- identify who might be harmed and how
- determine the extent of work related stress amongst different categories of staff
- determine the current effects of work related stress on employee health and well-being
- identify control measures to prevent or minimise stress and make recommendations where existing measures are found to be unsatisfactory
- prioritise areas for improvement and develop action plans.

The process of assessing the risks associated with work related stress should follow the five step approach to risk assessment (**HSE INDG 163, 2014**).

## 4. Five steps to risk assessment

### 1. Identify the hazards

Employers must identify all the potential hazards/ stressors in the workplace as part of the risk assessment process. They can use the six HSE management standard to help identify the main stress risk factors specific to the workplace but should be mindful that these categories of risk often overlap, combine or interact. It is important that employers focus on the prevention of workplace stress by tackling the root causes. This necessitates an organisation level approach to the risk assessment process. Specific workplace stress risk factors can be identified via a number of different mechanisms:

- data and evidence held by union branches – casework analysis, safety inspection data and reports, UCU stress surveys and research on work-related stress.
- employer data and evidence e.g. staff forums, focus groups, workplace surveys or questionnaires of all staff. There may be existing staff survey data that can be utilised or new surveys that could be run jointly with UCU. Staff absence, ill health and sickness data; staff turnover statistics; HR casework data; occupational health data and reports; and so on.

### 2. Decide who might be harmed and how

Consider all those who could be affected by each of the stressors identified in step 1 including employees, contractors, and students, members of the public, and anyone who could be harmed by the employer's business activities.

Some people may be at particular risk of work-related stress and this needs to be captured in risk assessments. People can require different considerations in the risk assessment process because of their occupational roles in the organisation or because they have specific requirements e.g. new and young workers, migrant workers, new or expectant mothers, disabled people, temporary workers, contractors, homeworkers and lone workers. Similarly, any workers with underlying mental health conditions or staff who have previously experienced stress related illness may have be at increased risk of harm from stressors identified in the workplace.

### 3. Evaluate the risks – explore problems and develop solutions

Having identified the hazards and who might be harmed the employer should consider the control measures that are already in place to deal with work related stress. Employers can use the HSE management standards and 'states to be achieved' to

determine any shortcomings and where to focus any interventions to reduce likelihood of harm.

## Intervention type

- **Primary:** these are focused at addressing issues at source, preventing the problem from continuing and having an adverse effect on employee health. These are the ideal type of intervention and are normally the most cost-effective
- **Secondary:** these focus on helping employees deal with the situation. However, they do not address the underlying cause of the problem
- **Tertiary:** these interventions are aimed at improving the health of employees who have been made ill by their work and if absent, help their return to work

Employers should follow the principles of prevention when identifying control measures. This is often referred to as a hierarchy of control measures which focuses on primary interventions/ controls to tackle the root causes of work-related stress.

It is important that UCU safety reps ensure that employers do not focus on individual protective measures, such as employee assistance programmes before they have examined collective measures which could avoid, reduce or mitigate the root causes of work related stress.

## 4. Record the findings of the assessment – develop and implement action plans

The findings of any significant risks should be recorded on the risk assessment form, and new control measures put in place following the hierarchy of control measures outlined above. A written action plan should be produced which includes details of the control measures to be implemented, together with details of who will carry out each action and the proposed timescale.

## 5. Monitoring and review

The effectiveness of control measures should be regularly monitored and reviewed. This can be done by:

- comparing sickness and absence levels before and after the risk assessment process
- comparing accident and incident data
- reviewing complaints and staff turnover rates
- completing a follow up survey of staff
- monitoring impact against HSE Management Standards 'states to be achieved'

It is also essential that employers review risk assessments when there are any substantial changes to ways of working or any potential new hazards to consider. The risk assessment is considered to be a 'living' document and must capture all significant and foreseeable risks. It must remain up to date and suitable and sufficient to ensure it continues to protect people from harm.

## **5. Example: 'hierarchy of control' measures for work-related stress**

### **Measures to avoid stress:**

- workload agreement leading to cuts in working hours
- re-distribution of tasks
- employ more staff e.g. more admin workers to do admin tasks
- clear job descriptions and roles
- allocation of resources and support to carry out job roles/tasks.

### **Measures to reduce impact of stress risk factors:**

- improved work organisation/working patterns codified in a safe working practices document
- relevant policies and procedures developed, e.g. bullying and harassment procedures
- strategies for increasing the participation in decision making
- work life balance policies
- improved communication strategies
- training.

## **6. Example: risk assessment stressors and controls following HSE Stress Management Standards**

UCU 'model stress risk assessment' can be found here:

[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/2068/Stress-toolkit-model-risk-assessment/doc/stresstool\\_modelriskassess.docx](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/2068/Stress-toolkit-model-risk-assessment/doc/stresstool_modelriskassess.docx)

### **1. Demands**

Demand refers to the demands of the job as a whole. Jobs have many features or characteristics such as how much work they involve, how much control over tasks is available, the variety of tasks involved, the support and help present and feedback provided.

Demands considers how all these features work together to affect the well being and health of staff who work in the job.

Dealing with job demands takes account of all the different features of jobs, and how they operate together to affect the well being of staff.

The following features of job demands should be considered in any stress risk assessment process:

- the amount, difficulty and pace of the workload, e.g. the number of different tasks, the complexity and intensity of the workload including emotional demands, deadlines and targets
- how clearly roles and responsibilities are specified within the job, e.g. up to date job description
- the amount of control staff have over the way they do their job, e.g. working to tight deadlines/targets
- the demands of working with others
- working patterns including long working hours, working over contracted hours, working at home to complete work related tasks, multi site and off site working and travelling time
- support and help available from management and colleagues
- the physical working environment, e.g. dealing with violence, abusive behaviour and lone working.

### **Potential risk assessment control measures**

- institutional policies and procedures, e.g. violence at work and lone working policies and procedures.
- analysis of workload and tasks for particular jobs leading to a workload agreement. The redistribution of workload/tasks.
- analysis of working patterns – e.g. cuts in working hours, re allocation of tasks, an agreement on multi site and off site working including travelling time.
- clear job descriptions
- adequate resources and support to carry out the job.
- participation in decision making processes
- work life balance initiatives, e.g. flexible working patterns
- safe working practices document.



## 2. Control

Control refers to the amount of say staff have over how their work is carried out. The following factors of control should be taken into account when completing a stress risk assessment:

- staff have an opportunity to have a say about the way work is carried out, e.g. participation in decision making processes.
- the pace of work activity is not driven by an external source, e.g. deadlines and targets imposed by external sources
- staff have adequate resources and support provided when undertaking new tasks
- staff have degree of control over working hours and when breaks are taken
- staff are encouraged to make suggestions to improve the work environment.

### Potential risk assessment control measures

- realistic deadlines/ targets
- strategies to increase participation in decision making processes
- improvements in working patterns, e.g. control over working hours and breaks
- two way communication strategies
- allocation of resources and support for curriculum changes/ changes in role etc
- work life balance initiatives
- provision of information and training
- safe working practices document.

## 3. Relationships

This factor describes the way we interact with other people at work. At work, relationships with managers, peers and others can dramatically affect the way we feel at the end of the working day.

The following factors should be considered in any risk assessment of work related stress:

- unfair treatment by managers and decision makers
- harassment or discrimination of specific categories of staff, e.g. women, black, disabled and LGBTQ+ staff
- bullying, intimidation or other victimisation from managers, other staff and students
- dealing with heavy emotional demands
- lack of line management support
- isolation in separate sections, e.g. no forum for staff to discuss common issues and problems
- poor communication in the organisation – both vertical and horizontal
- lack of social space/canteen facilities in the workplace.

## Potential risk assessment control measures

- harassment and bullying policy and procedure and clear consequences for unacceptable behaviour
- complaints procedure – treated seriously and acted on swiftly
- policies on equality and inclusion and clear consequences for staff found to be in breach of equality, diversity and inclusion policies
- mandatory training for staff and managers to promote equality and inclusion in the workplace
- better communication systems – both vertically and horizontally
- safe working practices adopted in safe working practices document
- establishment of cross-organisation committees to generate involvement and ownership
- staff development and professional development opportunities
- establish a half-day meeting slot.

## 4. Role

This relates to the fact that a person's role in the organisation should be clearly defined and understood, and that the expectations placed on them do not conflict.

There are two potentially stressful areas associated with a person's role in an organisation. These are role conflict and role ambiguity.

**Role conflict:** This exists when a person is torn between conflicting job demands, or by completing tasks that the person do not believe are part of their job. Examples of this would include:

- job responsibilities heavy and demanding
- overly target/deadline driven culture

**Role ambiguity:** This is where a person does not have a clear picture of their work objectives, often as a result of their responsibilities changing without being incorporated in their job description. Examples of this would include:

- lack of clarity about role
- unclear job description
- job changes without consultation
- feeling undervalued by the institution
- organisational change without consultation.

## Potential risk assessment control measures

- clear, up-to-date job descriptions
- analysis of job tasks and re-allocation of responsibilities
- ensure that deadlines and targets set are achievable

- improved consultation measures e.g. Change management consultation procedures
- measures to value staff contributions.

## 5. Support

Management support refers to a range of formal and informal activities undertaken by management that support the work of other staff.

The following factors are indicators of work related stress in regard to the support:

- lack of career development and promotion routes
- few or no training opportunities
- an over competitive culture
- staff feel undervalued
- staff given responsibility without the authority to take decisions
- a blame culture
- poor communication throughout the institution
- lack of consultation with staff
- lack of respect for staff.

### Potential risk assessment control measures

- systems in place for better communications
- staff and trade unions are consulted and participate in decision making.
- the provision of training for staff
- staff development opportunities
- work life balance initiatives
- management show concern and empathy for those they manage
- career development strategies in place
- recognition of staff achievements
- safe working practices procedure.

## 6. Change

Many educational institutions have undergone significant changes in the last 10 years. Changes in contracts, restructuring and reorganisation, job cuts and a massively increased workload. These changes can lead to significant increases in work-related stress.

Factors that should be considered in any stress risk assessment on change include:

- the pace and intensity of change
- the amount of new educational/ workplace initiatives that staff have to deal with.
- The introduction of new technology and systems of work
- the provision of resources and time to manage new initiatives and change.
- failure to meaningfully consult over changes.

- job insecurity experienced as a result of restructuring and redundancies
- the impact of restructuring on workload and job responsibilities
- mergers of institutions
- the relocation of jobs
- restructuring and rationalisation measures
- cuts in resources
- feeling anxious/insecure about the future.

### **Potential risk assessment control measures**

- staff involved in the planning process before change
- staff development sessions on new educational / workplace initiatives
- the allocation of sufficient time and resources for staff engaged in new initiatives
- consultation about changes 'in good time' with the recognised unions
- staff development needs analysed and acted upon
- consultation about how jobs / roles may change as the result of reorganisation or restructuring
- measures to ensure that workloads do not increase as a result of change
- clear and consistent communications about proposed changes or developments.

## Stress and workload resources:

Stress toolkit and resources:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/stress>

It's your Time - UCU workload campaign

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/workloadcampaign>

Workloads (HE)

[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10981/Bargaining-for-better-workloads-in-higher-education-in-response-to-the-Covid-19-pandemic-Jun-20/pdf/ucu\\_he\\_covid19-workload-bargaining\\_jun20.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10981/Bargaining-for-better-workloads-in-higher-education-in-response-to-the-Covid-19-pandemic-Jun-20/pdf/ucu_he_covid19-workload-bargaining_jun20.pdf)

TUC 13<sup>th</sup> biennial survey of union safety reps 2020/21

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/Safety%20reps%20survey%202021.pdf>

UCU model stress risk assessment

[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/2068/Stress-toolkit-model-risk-assessment/doc/stresstool\\_modelriskassess.docx](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/2068/Stress-toolkit-model-risk-assessment/doc/stresstool_modelriskassess.docx)

UCU model stress questionnaire

[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/2073/Model-stress-questionnaire/doc/stresstool\\_hse\\_question.docx](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/2073/Model-stress-questionnaire/doc/stresstool_hse_question.docx)

HSE line manager (stress) competency indicator tool:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mcit.htm>

Tackling work related stress using management Standards approach: HSE workbook:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/wbk01.pdf>

HSE example stress risk assessment (college)

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/learning-with-care-risk-assessment.pdf>

**UCU toolkits provide advice for branches and links to other sources of information. Anyone seeking specific advice in respect of the issues covered by this toolkit should consult their branch officers in the first instance, who in turn may need to take advice from UCU regional officials. Important time limits often apply; for further information about these or if you are seeking to pursue a legal claim on the issues covered in this toolkit, you should not rely on the toolkit alone but should seek additional advice from the union.**