Marking on-line and on-screen

A number of employers have recent dictated a wholesale shift from ordinary paper marking systems to compulsory on-line marking of student work. This is a significant change in the way work is done, and is the "introduction of a new technology" the definition of which includes a new system of work. The new system of work may also pose a greater threat to the health of members, as the use of Display Screen Equipment is linked to development of musculo-skeletal conditions in the arm, shoulder and back – collectively and commonly known as Repetitive Strain Injury, or RSI.

This is a significant change in working practices, and an area that is covered by legislation. The Safety Reps & Safety Committees Regulations, (SRSCR) Regulation 4A(1)(a) & (e) require employer to consult with safety reps in good time on such changes, not just make a unilateral decision. Guidance paragraph 41 to the SRSCR spells this out for employers. They have to:

- Provide health & safety reps with information about what they propose to do
- Give the reps an opportunity to express their views in the light of the information, and
- Take account of any response when making a decision.

In cases where an employer fails to consult, UCU branches should make a formal complaint, if for no other reason to put it on the record that the employer has ignored a statutory duty that the SRSC imposes on them. Demand they consult now. Download the SRSCR from http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/6/l/brownbook__UCU_logo.pdf

One size does NOT fit all. It is important that unilateral attempts by employers to introduce compulsory on-screen marking should be challenged. Staff should retain the option to mark paper scripts if they so choose. At least one UCU Branch has successfully resisted.

Where there is an increased incidence of on-line marking, UCU reps should investigate if anything more needs to be done under the Display Screen Equipment Regulations.

The Display Screen Equipment Regulations

Computer use at work is covered by the Display Screen Equipment Regulations (DSE). http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/l26.htm These set out standards for DSE work, the most important of which is the need to conduct a workstation assessment for anyone who uses DSE equipment, even if only for a few minutes a day. The HSE booklet contains a

very useful checklist that can be used by both workstation assessors and trade union safety reps at Appendix 5 of the DSE Regulations and Guidance booklet

Free eye tests and spectacles

The Regulations make provision for free eye tests and free spectacles that the DSE user may need in order to see the screen clearly. The eye-screen distance is longer than the normal reading distance, so reading specs are usually not adequate. In order to qualify for eye tests, the Regulations say that the person has to be "designated" as a "user", and the guidance to the Regulations sets out who this might be. It's important to understand that these things are negotiable and flexible - so we know that some employers automatically designate academic staff as users, while others resist such a move.

So who's a user?

The guidance to the Regulations is important in advising employers who to designate as users, and we can use that in arguments in negotiation with the employer if we need to. Guidance Paragraph 15 says:

"Where use is less continuous or frequent, other factors connected with the job must be assessed. It will generally be appropriate to classify the person concerned as a user or operator if they:

(a)   normally use DSE for continuous or near-continuous spells of an hour or more at a time; and

(b)   use DSE in this way more or less daily; and

(c)   have to transfer information quickly to or from the DSE;

and also need to apply high levels of attention and concentration; or are highly dependent on DSE or have little choice about using it; or need special training or skills to use the DSE."

Points (a) and (b) above are definitely our members, and increasingly (c) applies too; while most of the "or" factors cover the work our members do, especially where the employer requires on-line marking, so there is a very strong argument that lecturers are definitely users. Many have no choice but to use DSE - all work-related information and instruction comes via e-mail and all college or university resources are on the intranet, student records are databased, students submit e-mails, essays and other work, staff must keep diaries and timetables and write teaching materials since secretarial support disappeared, complete student reports and assessments, and research using the WWW and so on. That volume of work alone means lecturers are DSE users as far as UCU is concerned.

Marking on-screen over a sustained period would count as intensive work with the need to concentrate, move up and down through documents, add comments and corrections etc. Open University tutors who mark on screen have experienced problems with certain subject areas like maths, sciences and other subjects where student documents are often much more complicated that a straightforward word processed essay. So in more complex situations, there is a need to consider any additional factors that may cause stress - and software that doesn't lend itself easily to on-screen marking would be one important factor. Software performance is one of the factors included in the workstation assessment.

More general risk assessment

UCU reps should also ensure the employer reviews all general risk assessments to reflect:

- the imposition of even more time on the DSE input devices and screen, therefore the increased risk of developing a damaging musculo-skeletal condition;
- the potential for increased stress resulting from intensive DSE work;
- the restriction of choice/lack of control over how to do their job and,
- the imposition of change without consultation.

Change and Control are two stress factors in the HSE Stress Management Standards.

Short, regular breaks and other guidance

Employees need to be given guidance about this kind of work use as well. For example, the DSE Regulations and guidance point to the need for DSE users to be given regular breaks away from the screen. The DSE guidance recommends frequent short breaks rather than longer, infrequent ones, and the worker themselves should have control over this, but the DSE advice is not specific. It's also clear that breaks don't mean going off and sitting down - it means a change in activity away from the screen.

The TUC recommends a 15 minutes break after 45 minutes work - see the TUC Hazards at Work manual, Page 144. http://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace/displayscreenequipment.cfm That's a good standard. There are programmes that pop-up reminders about taking a break - some can even prevent further use until you have, by barring access to the programme for a short period.

Workers whose work is only partly DSE-based may be less at risk of health-related musculo - skeletal injury or stress, but as we all react differently to similar circumstances, then some of our members could be damaged. That risk would increase during exam periods, so it is important to establish safe working practices from the start.