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Challenges and opportunities for mainstreaming occupational safety and health (OSH) into university education.

Future engineers, architects, medical professionals and business administrators and managers will all need to take account of occupational safety and health (OSH) aspects in their working lives.

It is important to be aware of certain challenges to the process of mainstreaming OSH into university-level education. Among them, we can point out the following:

- The need for partnerships with individual universities, faculties and professors.
- Convincing professors of the importance of OSH education.
- High existing demands and pressures on undergraduate time.
- Lack of suitable OSH educational materials for the university level.
- Introducing practical, active learning methods for OSH in a learning environment dominated by theoretical learning methods.
- Lack of university-level teaching staff with OSH expertise and/ or active and participatory education skills.
- Sharing of educational resources where there is a strong tradition of guarding information in a culture of intellectual ownership.
- The continued need to improve the health and safety culture within universities.

Contextual factors that facilitate integration

Certain contextual features appear to facilitate the mainstreaming of OSH into university-level education. Therefore, mainstreaming activity is more likely:

- In areas where national OSH legislation places specific responsibilities on certain professionals such as those involved in civil engineering projects.
- Where training requirements for safety technicians are specified in law and include university-level study.
- Where there is an academic department on site that is engaged in OSH (this appears to be more likely in technical universities).
- In those areas where the university has specific OSH duties, for example for student safety during laboratory sessions and practical work.

Experience suggests certain ways and means to approach mainstreaming OSH into university-level education. For example:

- Start by finding and engaging some receptive individuals and institutions to work with.



- Be sensitive to competing curriculum demands and the pressures on undergraduate time that already exist.
- Embed OSH issues within courses rather than as an add-on; especially if there is very limited opportunity for additional modules.
- Use the need to provide safety instruction for practical work as a way of introducing a broader prevention-culture message to those students.
- For student motivation, have the study of OSH contribute to final grades or attainment of a recognised diploma, etc.
- Promote and facilitate a whole-university approach to OSH which combines OSH/risk education with creating a safe and healthy working/educational environment for all staff and students and actively involves staff and students in the process.
- Encourage employers to identify OSH knowledge as a factor in recruitment.
- Support business schools to include OSH and economic productivity in their research and conference programmes.

Examples of practices

- In the UK, funded by the national OSH authority, the Health and Safety Laboratory worked with the University of Liverpool to embed OSH elements into an undergraduate engineering course. This included the use of active learning methods and real accident case studies.
- At the Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland, the safety services involve the students' union in a participative approach to ensuring the university meets its OSH obligations and to promoting an OSH culture.
- In the Lacobus contest, France, architecture students must incorporate OSH into designs for architectural restoration projects. Other projects in France have engineering and architecture students working together on projects.

Ultimately, the way forward should be to develop a “whole-university” approach to creating a safe and healthy work and learning environment combined with risk education. The approach should combine OSH management to prevent risks with raising awareness and developing knowledge, skills and safe attitudes and behaviour in students and staff, including professors and technical, administrative and support staff. Support is needed to transfer existing examples of good practice and interventions at the university level and an exchange of both ideas and concrete tools is needed.