Education – evidence from the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER)

Executive Summary

European Agency
for Safety and Health
at Work

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report provides a comparative analysis of the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) findings for the education sector in several key areas of occupational safety and health (OSH) management, including psychosocial risks, drivers and barriers for OSH management, as well as the involvement of workers. In doing so, the study compared the ESENER results between 2014 and 2019 for the education sector, compared the education sector to other sectors, and assessed new topics covered by ESENER 2019 such as digitalisation and OSH, the perceived quality of external preventive services and the monitoring of sickness absences, while also considering the implications of the changing work environment since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The responses from the education sector to ESENER shed light on the extent of actions and measures adopted to secure a safe work environment. To a certain extent, these can be considered in the context of the EU Framework Directive 89/391/EEC on health and safety and supporting national or sector specific legislation that aims to encourage the introduction of measures to improve OSH.[1] However, the results should be considered as providing insight into the drivers and barriers of OSH management in the education sector rather than providing certainty around the level of legal compliance.

In addressing the research questions, the study used several analysis methods to identify the main OSH trends, including bivariate analysis of the ESENER results, literature review, and case study research on OSH risks and practices at different levels of the education sector in five countries. In addition, regression analyses using the ESENER dataset were used to test questions exploring the factors likely to promote good OSH management in educational establishments.

After distilling the main findings, a series of education sector-specific policy pointers were formulated for possible follow-up by Member States and relevant stakeholders.

The research findings suggest that there is need for a stronger OSH management response in the education sector. This suggestion is based on several findings that are outlined below and include issues such as identifiable gaps in the OSH management response between and within countries, the significant musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and psychosocial risks on the sector, the transformation of teaching due to digitalisation and the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

Key findings

The key findings are as follows:

- Through ESENER, the education sector recognised that significant OSH risks are endemic to their working environment, especially psychosocial risks, such as having to deal with difficult pupils and parents, or time pressure, and MSD risks, including prolonged sitting, repetitive hand or arm movements, as well as other risk factors, such as loud noise and so on.

- However, the results show that there are gaps in the level of risk awareness between establishments and countries, with a major share of educational establishments unaware of the risks that are recognised by experts and leading representatives as common to the sector.

- Yet, some of the gaps in the level of risk awareness can be partly explained by differences in the severity of risks across the sector; for example, establishments may or may not have specialised teaching units that use machinery or chemicals and so on, and tertiary education is much less exposed to difficult pupils.

- The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the level of risks, especially those associated with digitalisation and MSDs. Among other things, this includes online teaching that demands stronger efforts in ensuring that pupils are attentive and productive, adding to workplace stress. Pressure has also been put on management by parents unsatisfied with decisions around school closures and other measures.

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[1] Directive 89/391/EEC - Council Directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work. Council of the European Union. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A31989L0391 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A31989L0391

- Good efforts have been made to perform regular risk assessments, with 77% of establishments reporting to do so — this positions the education sector just above the EU sectoral average for this practice.

- Yet, there seems to be some gaps in the focus and scope of risk assessments. There is a greater focus on safety and chemical risks, even though establishments acknowledge that the main risks are psychosocial and MSD risks. Moreover, digital tools, home working and persons not on the payroll are not frequently covered by establishments that use these working methods. While ESENER was completed in 2019, it seems that the OSH management system in educational establishments was not well positioned for the transformation of the teaching sector under COVID-19.

- When compared to other sectors, the education sector has performed well in encouraging employee health through measures such as healthy nutrition, sport activities, back exercises and so on. Yet, use of measures to support sustainable working lives by lowering MSD-type risks are on the decline, which does not seem to align well with the main risks facing the sector.

- While more than half of establishments have procedures to support employees to return to work after long-term sickness absences, these seem to be on the decline in countries that were less likely to adopt them — again, the potential stresses and consequences of teaching under COVID-19 do not seem to be managed upfront.

- EU social partners stressed the sectoral problems of the limited supply of teachers and poor staff retention that are partly due to poor perceptions of the working environment. This suggests that there are broader strategic reasons for investing in OSH management — that is, as a way to make the sector more attractive to new and existing staff.

- Regression analyses were used to identify the factors that may 'predict' the introduction of good OSH management practices in establishments. In doing so, the analyses used several models to test the relationship between dependent variables (e.g. such as regular completion of risk assessments) and independent variables (e.g. such as the size of establishments). Helpfully, the models provided some clues on the approaches that may increase the likelihood of the introduction of OSH management practices in educational establishments, for example:

- Data analysis indicate that companies regularly conducting a workplace risk assessment are usually those that have appointed OSH representatives and have undergone inspections.

- Data analysis indicate that companies addressing digitalisation risks are usually those that have appointed OSH representatives and OSH is regularly discussed at top management level. A psychologist or occupational health doctor can assist in the identification of psychosocial risks.

- The analysis also revealed that the inclusion of supervisor–employee relationships in risk assessments is related to the introduction of measures to manage psychosocial risks such as increasing decision authority, training on conflict resolution, confidential counselling and measures to reorganise work.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Key features of the study on the education sector and ESENER

This study is part of a series of European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) research assignments that is using evidence from the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) and other complementary sources to explore sectoral occupational safety and health (OSH) trends and practices in depth (EU-OSHA, 2022a).

For this report, the education sector has been investigated in-depth, which according to 2021 figures from Eurostat[2] provides employment to 7% of the EU workforce and is central to forming a skilled and productive workforce and the advancement of society generally.

The research had a specific focus on several key OSH risks facing the education sector, such as musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), psychosocial risks, risks due to digitalisation and the recent transformation to homeworking due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As explained in Chapter 2 on the conceptual framework, the study was guided by multiple research questions in the areas of risk awareness, OSH management and risk assessment, including psychosocial and digitalisation risk management, barriers and drivers to OSH management, and employee representation and OSH.

The study used several data analysis methods to determine the main OSH trends, including bivariate analysis of the ESENER results, and a literature review. The project also included case study research on OSH risks and practices in five countries, namely Denmark, Germany, Ireland, France and Italy, that included desk research and interviews with national stakeholders to explore the main risks and OSH management practices used at different levels of the education sector.

Moreover, using logistic regression, the study addressed several research questions exploring the factors likely to promote good OSH management in establishments. This analysis used the evidence from the ESENER 2019 dataset relating to the education sector, including both responses to specific OSH-related questions and other contextual information on educational establishments such as their country location and size.

The main findings were used to develop education sector-specific policy pointers that may be helpful for review by Member States, which are indicated at the end of the report.

1.2 Overview of ESENER

ESENER is a large-scale, multinational survey of public and private establishments. ESENER which has been implemented in 2009, 2014 and 2019.[3]

ESENER plays a key role in the monitoring of OSH in Europe. By collecting feedback from the 'person who knows best about OSH' in establishments, ESENER provides unique insights into how health and safety is actually managed in the workplace. In particular, ESENER fills an information gap on the presence of health and safety risk factors and the methods and steps taken in managing them.

Although extensive EU legislation to improve OSH has been introduced since the 1980s, including the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC and other supporting directives, the implementation of these provisions differs among Member States, although in some cases this can be accounted for due to differences in their adoption, for example, by sector and establishment size. While ESENER does not provide information on the extent of legal compliance per se, it provides a good indication of the necessary actions taken to fulfil OSH obligations and support the development of safety cultures.

Moreover, ESENER 2019 is well placed to provide longitudinal monitoring of OSH management in Europe though comparisons with the prior wave, ESENER 2014.[4] This is possible due to the consistency of the approaches used by these waves, including:

- using a largely uniform set of survey questions;

- interviewing a single respondent per establishment — that is, 'the person who knows best about OSH';
- sampling establishments with five or more employees; and
- coverage of a common set of sectors, NACE Rev. 2 sectors, A to S. All activity sectors except for private households (NACE T) and extraterritorial organisations (NACE U).

1.3 Key features

The remainder of this report is organised as follows:

- **Chapter 2: Conceptual framework** sets out the study approach, the main areas of investigation and some key features of ESENER data connected to the education sector.
- **Chapters 3: Literature review** provides an overview of the work environment in the education sector and of the previously documented main OSH risks in the education sector, including psychosocial risks such as work organisation and job content, ergonomic factors, noise and so on.
- **Chapter 4: Health and safety risks in the education sector** sheds light on the type and extent of risks facing at least some staff in educational establishments, including safety, ergonomic, chemical and psychosocial risks.
- **Chapter 5: OSH management and risk assessment in the education sector** examines the education sector's approach in conducting risk assessments, the level of commitment towards OSH, the approach to monitoring OSH, the methods taken for the management of employee health and the uptake of OSH advice.
- **Chapter 6: Psychosocial risks and digitalisation** explores the education sector's prioritisation of the management of psychosocial risks, whether measures have been adopted to manage such risks, the digitalisation trends in the workplace and their consideration in an OSH management context.
- **Chapter 7: Drivers and barriers to OSH risk management in the education sector** focuses on the aspects that may encourage or discourage educational establishments from fulfilling their OSH duties.
- **Chapter 8: OSH employee representation in the education sector** explores the role of employee involvement in OSH management in the education sector and how it is implemented in practice.
- **Chapter 9: Conclusions and policy pointers** provides an overview of the main findings and some pointers on areas of OSH policy and management that if strengthened would help to realise better results in the education sector.

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