

Managing stress and well-being in FE

The education sector traditionally experiences high stress levels. HSE statistics suggest 36,000 cases of stress-related ill health are reported each year in the sector. This factsheet explains why taking stress seriously and tackling it will make your college a more effective organisation, and how to go about it, with step-by step advice and case studies from colleges that have found approaches that work

What is stress and why do we need to tackle it?

We all experience pressure regularly; it can motivate us to perform at our best. It is when we experience too much pressure and feel unable to cope that stress can result. The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health estimates that one in three people of working age are suffering from stress, depression or anxiety to a level they believe is making them ill.

The cost of stress is often hidden. Studies show that people suffering from stress do not perform at their optimum. This can in turn impact on student attainment. Conversely, a commitment to tackling stress is a commitment to high student attainment; it makes sense that happy, motivated staff will have a positive effect on the performance of students. Employers are also required by law to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities and to take action to control that risk.

The Stress Management Standards, designed by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), enable employers, staff and trade union representatives to deal effectively with stress in the fast-changing environment of the FE sector. Through effective assessment and monitoring, many of the triggers for stress can either be removed or their impact reduced.

After taking such action, many organisations have reported improvements in productivity, retention of staff and a reduction in sickness absence. NEU wants all colleges to experience this because we all benefit by working together to create an environment that supports well-being.

What are the Stress Management Standards?

The Stress Management Standards are designed to help employers manage the causes of work-related stress. Using the familiar risk assessment model, the standards refer to six areas of work that can lead to stress if not properly managed. Under each area there are 'states to be achieved', which organisations should work towards.

The Stress Management Standards require managers, employees and their representatives to work together to improve those areas of work, which will have a positive effect on employee well-being.

The approach is aimed at the organisation rather than individuals so everyone can benefit from any actions taken.

While the standards have been agreed between the employer's national body, the Association of Colleges, and the six nationally recognised trade unions, through the Workload Agreement, NEU has identified that most college stress policies are a dilution of the standards.

This still represents an attempt to deal with stress in the workplace and its implications for other policies, eg absenteeism, performance, even capability. However, NEU believes full engagement with the standards, as set out in the Workload Agreement, would benefit students, staff, colleges and the reputation of the sector.

Before you start: prepare the organisation

Before you introduce the Stress Management Standards remember to plan ahead and prepare your organisation.

Start by making sure senior managers, line managers and employees are committed to taking action. It is also a good idea to set up a project or steering group to oversee the work. This group will typically include senior and line managers, health and safety managers, trade union health and safety and employee representatives, and human resources and occupational health representatives.

The Stress Management Standards approach and how it applies in the workplace should be explained so that everyone understands it. Some colleges may already refer to the standards in their stress policies; others may have a stress policy broadly in line with the Workload Agreement. A starting point would be to outline the indicators of stress and the principles behind tackling it, as given in the standards. This can help explain the reasons for using the approach and can define the roles and responsibilities of those involved in making the policy work.

Securing senior management commitment

The governing body should have sufficient training and information so they understand the rationale and business case for stress management, as well as their legal duties. Successful programmes depend on commitment from senior managers. This might be demonstrated by, for example, a governor being the project sponsor, visible support from the principal, and governors and heads of department attending stress management training.

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

Support for staff

Before the standards approach is introduced, you need to make arrangements to support your staff. This may be support for line managers wanting more information about the process, or staff wanting help to complete surveys. The steering/project group may be able to provide such support.

Step one: identify the risks

The standards suggest colleges look at six areas that can have a negative impact on employee health if not managed properly:

- demands – includes workload, work patterns and the work environment
- control – how much say a person has in the way they do their work
- support – includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues
- relationships – promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- role – whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the

- organisation ensures roles do not conflict with one another
- change – how organisational change (large or small) is managed.
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Completing step one will introduce a more precise and considered vocabulary around stress. This will enable concerns to be addressed more clearly.

Step two: decide who might be harmed and how

Gather data

You probably already have a lot of data that can be used to identify areas of good and poor practice. Typical data available includes:

- surveys
- sickness absence data
- staff turnover rates
- exit interviews
- number of referrals to occupational health
- information from existing staff forums.

Annual staff surveys and/or the HSE Management Standards indicator tool (a questionnaire available on the HSE website at www.hse.gov.uk/stress) can be used to gather the views of staff.

Try not to rely on one set of data as this might not provide an accurate picture of your organisation. It is better to use a number of sources and look for relationships within the data to get a more accurate view of the current state of your organisation.

The analysis of your data helps you to understand your organisation's current situation. If you have used the HSE indicator tool, you can start to evaluate your data with the analysis tool on the HSE stress website, as above.

Communication is crucial

If staff do not understand why a survey is being done or are sceptical about its motives, they may not return the questionnaire. A decent rate of return is essential to get a representative sample of the organisation. Initial communication is very important. Trade union and employee representatives can help communicate with staff. Ways of improving response rates include delivering questionnaires with pay slips to ensure all staff get a copy, and leaving plenty of time for completion of surveys.

Completing step two will mean a college is using data more efficiently; it will help form an evidence-based action plan that will enable policies to have a better interrelationship.

“The HSE indicator tool 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

Step three: evaluate the risks

Use the results from step two, along with the standards, to help you decide what to do next. Identify hot spots and priority areas. Check the results of the analysis with staff, then work with staff to determine how to address the gap between current performance and the 'states to be achieved' within the standards (see below for an example).

Make sure you involve staff and their representatives in discussions as they are often the ones closest to the issues and best placed to suggest improvements. A good way to consult is through focus groups. The number of groups will depend on things like the size and structure of the college, available resources and, most importantly, the results of your data analysis from step two.

The outcomes of the focus group discussions should be a set of suggested actions aimed at addressing specific issues. If you have used multiple focus groups then it is normally the role of the project team or steering group to collect and prioritise the suggested actions.

States to be achieved: example

There is a standard for each of the six risk areas. Demands, for example, covers issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment.

The standard to achieve in this area is that employees indicate they are able to cope with the demands of their job, and systems are in place to respond to any individual concerns. Each risk area includes several points under 'What should be happening/states to be achieved'. For the area of demands, these are as follows:

- the organisation provides staff with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work
- people's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands
- jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees
- staff concerns about their work environment are addressed.
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The full list of standards to achieve in each area is available at www.hse.gov.uk/stress. Completing step three means a college should have a more robust and transparent relationship with staff and trade unions. This is a key stage in which a combination of evidence and dialogue can create a positive workplace based on a culture of trust and respect.

Step four: record your findings

Develop and implement action plans

It is often the case that the actions identified in step three are aimed at different levels of the organisation such as team, department or even particular site, and will deliver in different timescales (short, medium or long term). So, when compiling your action plan, consider how you intend to evaluate each action and how you will know whether it has been successful. When complete, the action plan should be communicated to employees. Some examples of popular actions are:

- giving specific groups of staff more control over aspects of their work
- improving communication up and down the management chain, and between groups
- management development, particularly in interpersonal skills
- job reviews/task analysis using the standards as a framework
- updating a specific policy or procedure shown to have failings.

Test decisions and policies on pilot groups

This will help you avoid the common problem that decisions made in theory can be difficult to put into practice. Also, different departments may have different problems and these need to be taken into account.

Split action plans into the six areas

This can help you link actions back to the process, addressing 'states to be achieved'. Ensuring quick wins is also a popular option, so staff can see action is being taken.

The essential role of the line manager

Line managers play a vital role in identifying and managing stress within the organisation. They are likely to see the problems which cause stress first hand and will often be the first point of contact when an individual is feeling stressed. As part of your action plan, it is essential to ensure line managers have the skills and behaviours to be able to manage these situations well. Line managers can visit the HSE's stress website to try out a self-assessment survey and see if they have the right skills to prevent their staff being made ill because of stress at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mcit.htm.

Completing step four means a college will have evidenced their intent to support staff and to work with staff to introduce a sense of well-being in the workplace.

Step five: monitor and review

At this stage reflect on what you have found out. In particular, consider what the types of activities you have put in your action plan tell you about the underlying issues in your organisation. Think about what you can do in the future to prevent the problems identified happening again so you are able to deal with them in a proactive rather than reactive way. Explain to managers that good stress management is not about a survey, but is an ongoing process of continuous improvement.

Monitor the actions in your plan to ensure they are having the desired effect within the appropriate timescale.

Remember, as with all risk assessments, record what you have done. As part of your monitoring process, you may need to repeat the Management Standards approach again. Completing step five will place a college as a 'learning' organisation, ie one that can learn to do things better and more consistently over time.

Find out more

For more information about the Stress Management Standards and other advice on stress, visit www.hse.gov.uk/stress.

You can find out more about this and other health and safety issues on NEU's website at: www.neu.org.uk/hands.

If you have any specific questions or would like NEU's help in introducing the standards in your college, you can contact NEU's national official for post-16, Norman Crowther, at norman.crowther@neu.org.uk.

Case study: Chichester College*

Chichester College is a further education college that employs around 1,400 staff, comprised of teaching, administrative and support staff. It is situated across a number of sites, with the main campus in Chichester.

This case study explores how the college went from staff, managers and employee representatives being aware the college was experiencing problems with stress but lacking the

information and knowledge to address this, to a point where the college had put in place a framework for recognising and responding to stress.

The challenge

The college received an inspection by the HSE in summer 2008, at which it was told its policies and practices on dealing with stress should be overhauled. In particular, the college was instructed to undertake a stress audit. There was concern the HSE might take action against the college unless this was done, and it also confirmed management perceptions that the college needed to tackle increased levels of sickness absence due to stress.

Stress had been highlighted as an issue for the college by a staff survey and, although the college had been dealing with individual cases, it had not put into place an organisation-wide approach. Until the HSE visit, the college had tried to support staff who took sickness absence due to stress by offering HR staff as a resource if individuals needed to talk through their problems, but no overall stress management strategy was in place. The challenge was therefore to undertake a stress audit across the whole organisation.

A project group was set up to develop an audit of stress in the college, led by the HSE and supported by an Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) adviser. Ideally such a group would ordinarily be set up by the college and trade unions, and would only need this wider support in very challenging circumstances. The overall objectives of the project were to carry out a stress risk assessment, using the Stress Management Standards approach as a general framework, and then to formulate action plans to address the issues identified.

In practical terms, the project consisted of the following steps.

Step one

A steering group was set up to oversee the work related to stress management. This consisted of trade union and senior management representatives, health and safety representatives and other staff representatives. An Acas staff member also attended in an advisory capacity.

The members of the steering group jointly drew up a document containing the terms of reference for the project.

Step two

The college conducted 10 focus groups with a range of staff across the college. The resulting report was disseminated throughout the college directly to employees.

Based on learning from the focus groups, an action plan was drawn up by the steering group.

The outcome and benefits

There were a number of concrete outcomes from the project: for example, stress training for staff was 'revitalised' and the college ran a new programme on how to avoid perceptions of bullying for managerial staff. The college also implemented some 'quick win' changes, such as providing protective clothing (jackets and boots) for employees working on the college's farm.

In terms of softer impacts, staff felt the college was more aware of stress and recognised it more than before. Managers and employee representatives believed the project itself was of great value as a knowledge-gathering exercise about the main work related stressors encountered by staff.

The hope was that this set out a firm basis for future action to tackle the issues. The college also recognised this was a long-term goal and, in some senses, the college was still at the beginning of the journey.

**NEU would like to thank Acas for this case study.*

Case study: Bilborough College**

Bilborough college caters for students aged 16-19. It has grown from 635 to 2,250 full-time students (Sept 2010). For over five years, the college has held the national Career Mark for quality provision of careers advice.

Under a new principal the college introduced the Stress Management Standards so it could evidence how seriously they took staff welfare.

It was felt the standards also reinforced an awareness of health and safety legislation which, if left unchecked, could have a serious impact on the college in terms of employment tribunals, inspection and general staff ethos. The college was also aware that educational institutions have had departments shut or their public profile impaired by not being attentive to the well-being of staff.

The college used the standards as a developing set of tools which were increasingly embedded in college procedures and practice, so ensuring their sustainability and effectiveness. This was reinforced by a stress management workshop run by the NEU which the principal and NEU lead member attended.

Implementation

The college set up a stress working group made up of managers, staff and trade union representatives. The managers and staff involved were trained in the standards, their purpose and use.

The college completed its first staff survey and received a 66% response rate. This was followed by a series of focus groups for lecturing staff, support staff and managerial staff, which the college commissioned Acas to run.

Using such a proactive approach enabled the college to support staff directly but also to prevent the indirect effects of stress, such as lower performance, loss of confidence and self-esteem, which can set up a vicious circle that individuals feel they cannot get out of. The college found the HSE indicator tool useful in conducting a survey of stress across the organisation.

Challenges to overcome

At first, the college found it difficult to get volunteers for the focus group. However, partnership working, in particular with the trade union reps, helped them to achieve this.

The college also quickly learnt that purely quantitative data did not help in all cases. For example, if somebody said they disagreed with a statement, the college still didn't know why. When staff were asked to participate, it was also often the usual suspects, so the college needed to think about other ways of involving different staff members in order to get as rich a picture as possible.

The key barrier for the college was not having a clear project plan as to objectives at the outset because the project began with an ethical vision not a critical business case.

Actions

Apart from the specific focus on the issues that arose from the survey and the focus groups, the college's action plan contained actions such as:

- provision of remission time for curriculum managers
- class size monitoring
- better flexible working policy
- college coursework policy for students ensuring parity for all staff
- consultation around the timetable
- student views on timetable sought
- shared lunch break
- improvements in reception area (glass screen)
- increased monitoring of temperatures across the college
- establishment of a college security working group
- revised lesson observation process
- end-of-year celebration event
- stressor assessment for individual staff (voluntary or referred)
- fair treatment advisers who are independent of the college and deal with bullying issues.

The examples given here show the standards can facilitate discussions between management and trade union reps about all areas of college life, giving a holistic appraisal of well-being according to the people who work in colleges. Such discussions change beliefs and attitudes, if done well, and prompt a convergence of interests.

Following the standards approach also provides a strong evidence base and justification for action.

Ongoing review

While the college did not have a critical issue in regard to staff stress, the surveys they completed showed improvement in the areas that most concerned staff. There were a surprising number of staff, albeit a very small number, who reported they were being bullied. As this was an unexpected finding, more work needed to be done to clarify the concern. Nevertheless, as it is such a serious issue, the college implemented fair treatment advisers as a support mechanism for staff.

The views and concerns of staff have been clearly raised and considered by the stress working group. Using the standards, the college has learnt what effects its organisational principles, policies and practices have upon staff. That way it can deal with unintended as well as intended outcomes more successfully through the indicator tool, the stress working groups, and by a collaborative approach to the learning environment as a whole.

***NEU would like to thank Chris Bradford, principal of the college, Ruth Pender, director of human resources, and Simon Holland, NEU rep at Bilborough College for their time and honest appreciation of their experiences.*

Need advice?

Your first point of contact for advice and support from the union is your National Education Union workplace representative. If there is no representative in your workplace, you should contact your District or Regional office. For immediate advice see the help and advice pages, and in the event of no other option, Advice Line.