USHA Universities Safety and Health Association

GUIDANCE FOR MANAGING WORK RELATED STRESS WITHIN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

In partnership with

UCEA Universities & Colleges Employers Association

Contents

Foreword

Work-related stress is not a new challenge for the higher education sector, but its scale and impact continue to evolve. The demands placed on university staff - balancing academic pressures, administrative complexity, and the broader responsibilities of an institution - require **proactive leadership and structured approaches** to maintain support for mental health and wellbeing.

This guidance has been developed to support **senior leaders, managers, and practitioners** in effectively addressing work-related stress within higher education. It builds on well-established **Health and Safety Executive (HSE) principles**, legislative requirements, and sector best practices to provide a **comprehensive framework** for identifying risks, implementing robust strategies, and fostering a **resilient workplace culture**.

The approach outlined here is **practical and evidence-driven**, ensuring institutions can **embed wellbeing** into their governance structures without compromising operational efficiency. More than ever, universities need to **prioritise a whole-institution approach** to mental health - one that aligns with **Universities UK's strategic vision** while respecting the nuances of each institution's workforce.

Senior leaders must recognise that managing work-related stress is not just a compliance exercise - it is a **strategic imperative**. Effective leadership fosters an environment where staff thrive, productivity is sustained, and institutional reputation is protected.

This second edition builds on insights from sector-wide experts, integrating **risk assessment methodologies, action plans, and clear accountability structures** to strengthen leadership capabilities in stress management. By adopting this guidance, institutions can reinforce their commitment to safeguarding staff wellbeing and sustaining a **high-performing university environment**.

The team that has developed this guidance have done an exceptional job and I would like to thank them for their hard work and to commend this guidance to you.

Jane Ball
Head of Health and Safety, The Open University
Chair and Executive Board Member of USHA

Introduction

The **Universities Safety and Health Association (USHA)** is the leading authority on **safety and wellbeing** in higher education, ensuring that university staff, students, and visitors operate in secure, healthy environments.

USHA is at the **forefront of shaping sector-wide standards**, producing rigorous **statistical analysis**, hosting **high-profile conferences**, and publishing **benchmark-setting guidance** that directly influences policy and practice. It doesn't just **support institutions**—it drives **sector-wide transformation**.

With **active engagement in consultation and lobbying**, USHA plays a **critical role** in the development of national and international policies that shape the future of health and safety in higher education. Its **thought leadership and advocacy** ensure that universities remain ahead of evolving regulatory demands and best practices.

A truly **global network**, USHA's membership extends across the UK and internationally, with affiliated institutions in **Australia, Ireland, Singapore, and the USA**. It also maintains **strong connections with STEM R&D organisations**, working closely with key partners such as **CSHIEMA (USA) and AUSA (Australasia)** to foster innovation and collaboration in safety and risk management.

More than just a professional association, **USHA is a powerhouse for progress**, delivering **expert-led initiatives, sector-wide knowledge sharing, and strategic partnerships** that enhance health and safety across university environments.

The project group who developed this guidance were:

- Jane Ball, Project Chair, The Open University
- Mark Saunders – Anglia Ruskin University
- Colleen Ryan – University of the Arts
- Elaine Schegar – UCEA
- Alan Mountain-Hewett – University of Hull
- Scott Trim – Aston University
- Dev Agarwal – University of York
- James Corbett – Bedford University
- Julie Ramage – University of St Andrews
- Sarah Van-Zoelen – Loughborough University
- Mike Salmon - Kaplan
- Ian Wright – Anglia Ruskin University

This guidance has been produced for those within each higher education institution who have a responsibility for the mental health and wellbeing of their employees. This includes the governing body, the executive team, senior managers, line managers and those who have a professional role to play.

The guidance suggests actions for each tier of the institution and identifies the role and support they can expect from their professional advisors. These actions are colour-coded and matched to **plan, do, check, act** to make them as easy as possible to follow.

This guidance, produced by USHA and in consultation with recognised trade unions, is therefore aimed specifically at enabling universities to support their staff, but it uses principles which could just as easily support the student experience and thus helps to provide a holistic approach.

Background

According to a report by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in November 2024, the number of workers reported to be suffering from work-related ill health during 2023/24 is 1.7 million – which is similar to 2022/23 (1.8 million workers).

The rate of self-reported work-related ill health remains broadly similar to the previous year, although the current rate is still higher than the 2018/19 pre-pandemic level. Approximately half of those reported ill-health related to stress, depression or anxiety. The current rate of self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety is higher than the pre-pandemic level but has decreased from 910,000 in 2022/23.

An estimated 33.7 million working days were lost in 2023/24 due to self-reported work-related ill health or injury.[1]

Legislation

Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974
Employers have a duty to ensure so far as reasonably practicable the health and safety of their employees and anyone else who may be affected by their work activities.[2] Traditionally, the Health and Safety at Work Act focussed more on 'safety' with a nod to 'health' through occupational health monitoring. As the world of work is changing through advancement of technologies and hybrid working, the focus on 'health' is shifting to include 'wellbeing'. Cases such as *Sutherland v Hatton (2002)*[3] remain influential in UK case law regarding employer liability for workplace stress.

Employees also have a duty to take reasonable care for their own health and safety, to cooperate with their line managers and not to do anything which may adversely affect others. This also extends to managers under Section 37 of the Health and Safety at Work Act if an offence was due to their consent, connivance or neglect.

Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
A suitable and sufficient assessment of risks must be carried out for the health and safety of those to whom the employer is responsible.

Guidance from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) make it clear that employers should, as a minimum undertake an ***organisation level*** risk assessment to identify the risk factors which could lead to exposure to work-related stress. The assessment should address the specific risks facing your employees, and detail who might be harmed and how. In addition, employers should undertake department level risk assessments where departmental risk differs from the organisational level risks.

Stevenson-Farmer Review
The report Thriving at Work produced as part of a government review carried out by Stevenson-Farmer in 2017 suggested each institution should adopt a number of mental health core standards:

- Produce, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan
- Develop mental health awareness among employees

[1] HSE Annual work-related ill-health and injury statistics 2023-24 and HSE statistics – working days lost
[2] HSE: Work-related stress and how to manage it
[3] Sutherland v Hatton [2002] EWCA Civ 76 (05 February 2002)

- Encourage open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling
- Provide your employees with good working conditions
- Promote effective people management
- Routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing.

The report recommends that all public sector employers should:

- Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting
- Demonstrate accountability
- Improve the disclosure process
- Ensure provision of tailored in-house mental health support and signposting to clinical help.

The report states that 'all organisations, whatever their size, will be: equipped with the awareness and tools to not only address but to manage mental ill-health caused or worsened by work; equipped to support individuals with a mental health condition to thrive from recruitment, and throughout the organisation; aware of how to get access to timely help to reduce sickness absence caused by mental ill health'.

Whole University Approach

The vision developed and promoted by Universities UK (UUK) (updated May 2020) is 'for UK universities to be places that promote mental health and wellbeing, enabling all students and all staff to thrive and succeed to their best potential'. It calls on universities to 'adopt mental health as a strategic priority, to see it as foundational to all aspects of university life, for all students and all staff'. This approach has been further endorsed by the HSE.

There are four domains identified by UUK as key to their Step change approach, two of which have been replicated in the left-hand side of the table below to demonstrate how those managing Health and Safety within the institution could be used to support staff and students. Those identified by USHA are in the right-hand side of the table.

Domain of Support – identified by UUK	Health and Safety input – identified by USHA
Set within a whole university mental health strategy, alongside wider support for staff and students such as support for disability, harassment and bullying, faith, housing, and finance, learning and work.	A strategy suitable for both students and staff which uses Health and Safety legislation and good sector practice as its foundation. Strategic implementation plans which are used by Health and Wellbeing professionals to drive positive mental and physical health through their actions. The Health and Safety team working collegiately with HR, the student's union and student services to ensure an all-encompassed approach to wellbeing for all.
Designed through co-production with students and staff, delivered according to need, and responsive to changing need.	Wellbeing forums provide an opportunity to discuss mental and physical health to help inform the right level and type of support. Wellbeing champions help to promote and adapt good practice locally depending on need.

	Support is one of the HSE's Management Standards which is understood and integrated as part of the Health and Safety management system. Decisions around staff health and safety are made at committees where minutes are taken and then published locally. Employees are represented at those committees by selected representatives. The inclusion of student representatives on these committees would help ensure that they have input in the decision-making process. Ensuring a round-up of wellbeing forums is presented to your Health and Safety Committee will ensure Governance oversight.
Safe and effective interventions that are regularly audited for safety, quality and effectiveness.	Line managers and student facing staff are provided with the tools and training they need to recognise adverse mental health and know how to address this with the individual or know where to go for further help and support. Health and Safety professionals routinely carry out wellbeing specific audits or include wellbeing as part of their management system audits.
Properly resourced, staffed and managed.	USHA recognises the important and unique role that Health and Safety professionals can undertake in respect of wellbeing and urge universities to resource this area of expertise accordingly.
Accessible to all members of the university community, and appropriate to culture and context.	Health and Safety information is accessible to both students and staff as part of the University community. Equalities legislation is taken into account when producing such information and as part of Health and Safety practice. Equality Impact Assessments are completed in line with established policies and processes.
Prepared for a mental health crisis and suicide by having clear plans in place.	Health and Safety professionals support policies which reflect upon all aspects of work-related health, including suicide and ensure that clear plans are in place.
Working in partnership with local NHS and care services with effective working relationships and information sharing agreements in place.	USHA recognises the benefits of utilising existing resource and expertise both within and external to the University. Health and Safety teams can provide valuable input in any such arrangement and can act as a key coordinator and/or influencer.

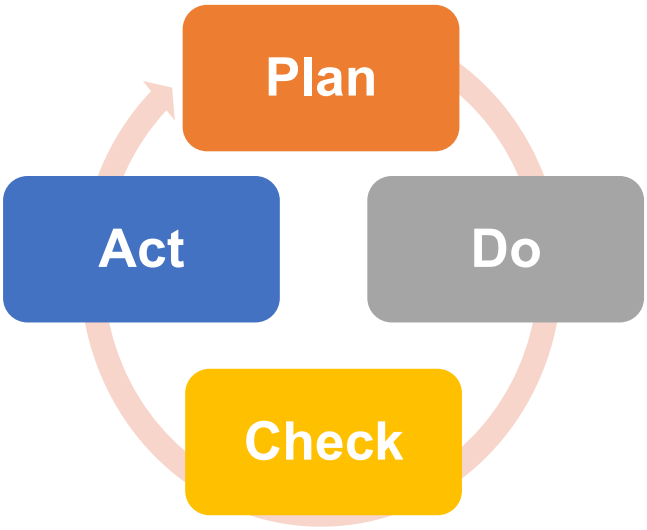
UUK Domain – Live	**Health and Safety Support**
Health promotion: promote ways to improve staff and student wellbeing to encourage healthy behaviours (physical activity, healthy eating and sleeping) and discourage unhealthy behaviours such as abuse of alcohol/drugs.	Risk assessment supported by Health and Safety professionals should be key in enabling fun activities and sport to be enjoyed in as safe a way as possible which will, in turn, improve mental health. Health and Safety campaigns which focus on wellbeing and lifestyle apply to both students and employees and as such can have a much greater impact when done holistically especially when supported by Health and Wellbeing expertise.

Healthy culture: create safe and open cultures that encourage inclusion and diversity and actively oppose bullying, harassment and marginalisation.	Health and Safety policies are specific to employees but also apply to those who use university premises or undertake activities on behalf of the university. They benefit students and staff by clearly identifying the way that the university will address health and safety in an inclusive and fair way, including for example, violence and aggression at work, welfare, mental health, psychological safety, stress management etc. Risk assessments and workplaces are routinely checked via audit to ensure a safe and healthy environment. These workplaces are used by employees and students alike and thus both benefit. Health and Safety information and advice is not restricted to just employees but provided openly to all, linking and signposting to specialist organisations and services where relevant. USHA promotes the inclusion of staff and students.
Healthy environment: design work, learning and living spaces that promote good mental health, encourage access to nature and reduce physical risks.	legislation already exists to provide the framework to enable consideration of suitable space and the working/study environment. The input of Health and Safety expertise at the early design and decision-making stage can help to ensure new buildings and spaces are created to support positive health (physical and mental) and a safe and inclusive environment.
Healthy community: work in partnership with students' unions and guilds to actively support the social integration of students, support academic achievement and retention, and reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing.	The promotion of positive Health and Safety on campus will have a positive impact on the surrounding community. Health and Safety professionals can support student wellbeing by working with the students' union and student services teams to help develop a healthier campus environment and build a closer University community.
Visible leadership: senior leaders promoting open and supportive conversations is essential to bring about and sustain change.	Health and Safety professionals encourage open conversation to identify areas of concern and implement change to reduce the risk. They provide coaching and mentoring to support knowledge development. Wellbeing forums provide an opportunity to openly discuss mental and physical health in a safe and non-stigmatised way.

A Structured University Approach

Alignment to ISO Principles

This document uses the **Plan: Do: Check: Act** principles to provide a robust structure and to comply with the aims of ISO 45001:2018. To make it as easy as possible to follow this guidance, each section has been colour coded.



Plan	Identify and analyse the problem, identify potential root causes, and decide what to do about them.
Do	Pilot the approach in a selected area and measure the results.
Check	Review the effectiveness of the pilot and measures taken, decide whether the approach needs further amendment.
Act	Make any changes necessary and roll out more widely.

Alignment to USHA Leadership Guidance

This guidance is aligned to the USHA document **Guidance on Leadership and Management within the Higher Education Sector** produced by USHA and endorsed by UCEA and UUK. It recognises that each higher education institution (HEI) is unique in terms of its structure, size, risk profile, composition and management structures. As such the document states that 'it is important to take a holistic approach to health and safety with consideration of occupational health and workplace wellbeing matters linked with institutional health and safety arrangements to enable a joined-up approach'.

The document uses a model based on five tiers of management, identified as 'pivotal to securing good health and safety management'. It further states that 'Health and safety performance should be recognised as an integral aspect of HEI management and leaders and managers at all tiers are best placed to influence this by visibly demonstrating their commitment'.

The principles and how they can be related to stress management are below. The same principles apply to workplace stress and the management of it.

'Enabling innovation and learning and not stifling them'

- This is aligned to the management standard of control by providing sufficient autonomy to enable the employee to have some say in the way that their role is carried out and to encourage an innovative way of working.

'Ensuring that workers and the public are properly protected'

- This includes protection from the triggers that can cause workplace ill-health such as stress. These triggers can be identified initially by way of an institutional risk assessment.
- Local assessments may be used to supplement this approach and identify the need for further adjustments.
- The triggers identified by the Health and Safety Executive focus on Demands, Control, Role, Relationship, Support and Change which are detailed later in this document.

'Providing overall benefits to society by balancing benefits and risks, with a focus on reducing real risks – both those which arise more often and those with serious consequences.'

- Institutions have a moral duty to help ensure that employees leave their workplace each day in the same or better state of health that they started. This benefits the individual, the institution, their families, the local community and the wider society.

'Ensuring that risks are managed responsibly and understand that failure to manage real risks responsibly is likely to lead to robust action'.

- Failure to protect staff from mental health risk including stress and bullying is as important as minimising exposure to physical risks.
- The institution therefore has a duty to assess the risks to their staff and others who may be affected by their work activities.
- Reasonable measures must be identified and implemented to control those risks.

'Enabling individuals to understand that as well as the right to protection, they also have to exercise responsibility'.

- Employees have their own duty of care in law, to themselves and to others which means they do have to take action to maintain their state of health.

Complementary to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Guidance

This guidance aims to complement but not repeat the step-by-step workbook for stress management provided by the HSE. As such it approaches stress management from the perspective of Health and Safety and thus utilises the process of risk assessment. It is anticipated therefore that Health and Safety professionals will either be leading on wellbeing or recognised as a key stakeholder in any institutional approach to stress management.

The HSE have identified six Management Standards which indicate the primary causes of stress related illness. These standards can be used both proactively and reactively to provide the foundation of a stress risk assessment. The Standards are:

Standard	Condition
Demands	Workload, work patterns and the work environment.
Control	Autonomy - how much say the person has in the way they do their work.
Support	Encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
Relationships	Positive approach to avoid conflict. Dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
Role	Clear understanding of the role and its place within the organisation. Not duplicated or conflicted with others.
Change	How well organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated within the organisation.

Risk Assessment

Fundamental to any stress management approach is risk assessment which should be conducted to identify potential stressors and to highlight any measures already in place which might mitigate them. A risk assessment could be produced at institutional level initially to provide a general overview of the scale of the issue.

Further assessments can be undertaken at Faculty, School, Department or team level to determine those at higher risk and to implement local controls. It is useful to base the assessments on the HSE Management Standards and include controls which either are, or could be, implemented across all areas where possible. This might include, for example, an annual appraisal scheme, attendance management policies, line management training etc. The assessments should be accompanied by SMART action plans outlining any additional work which needs to be carried out.

Conducting an Equality Impact Assessment in relation to managing stress in the workplace is also necessary for identifying and addressing/mitigating, where possible, any disproportionate effects that stress-related policies, practices, or environments may have on employees from different protected characteristic groups under the Equality Act 2010, such as age, race, disability, or sex.

The steps which follow are aligned to the HSE's guidance on Tackling Work-related Stress using the Management Standards. It both supports and informs the risk assessment process.

A Step-by-Step Approach

Plan

Step 1 – Data Evidence

The Labour Force Survey is a good source of data for all sectors as are the reports mentioned in this guidance and referenced at the end of this document. The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) produces an annual report on sickness absence for member institutions, which provides a good national overview of the HE sector specifically.

Within each institution there will be a reporting system for capturing sickness absence, the data of which can be analysed to identify the levels of absence which are stress related. This data can help identify whether there are key areas, teams, roles or grades which would benefit from specific support or whether the issue is consistent across the institution. Such data can help inform the risk assessment, gain buy-in for the business case and will be useful later on in assessing the impact of any changes made. It does need to be borne in mind that sickness absence in universities can be subject to under-reporting especially within the academic community.

A staff survey is a good data source, providing clear responses and direct comments on a range of targeted questions which can help inform the risk assessment. This data is very useful but can be more compelling if mapped against the HSE's Management Standards and compared year on year. Ideally the questions should be written in such a way as to directly map to each of the standards e.g. any analysis carried out in the survey against the 'Demands' standard should help inform the 'Demands' part of the risk assessment. Mapping is more challenging but still possible if the questions are fixed by the survey company and cannot be changed. More importantly the questions should stay the same for each survey so that the mapping is comparative from one survey to the next, or an analysis of the impact of a change in questions should be given. However, in order for this to be credible and representative it will need a good response rate from all areas and levels of the institution.

Step 2 – Secure senior management and colleague commitment

The importance of positive health and wellbeing is now widely recognised within the HEI sector so getting senior management support for carrying out an institutional stress risk assessment should not be too onerous. Senior managers, especially those on the executive board will, however, want to see evidence that the risk of stress related ill-health is something they need to act upon and prioritise because demand on university resources is always high. The use of analysed sickness absence and staff survey data provide a good starting point. However, a stronger business case would be to link stress related sickness absence to cost, need for legal compliance and the benefits of positive wellbeing on production, performance and the employee experience. It is also worth using additional rationale for the approach by linking it to the UUK agenda on mental health, the Stevenson-Farmer report and/or the HSE's report, Tackling work-related stress.

Inclusion of the following key risks may help to demonstrate the benefits of taking action to combat stress:

Student experience – think about the negative impact that stressed staff have on the student learning, living and socialising experience e.g. reduced productivity, lack of motivation, poor concentration etc. Focus on the positive reverse side of this.

Financial sustainability – sickness absence is expensive, as is backfilling, but what about the longer-term costs of low institutional morale, loss of innovation and 'turned off' enthusiasm for change leading to difficulties in recruitment and retention? Support for positive mental health, as illustrated in this guidance, can help reduce sickness absence, increase motivation and encourage peer support.

Legal compliance – all institutions have a duty to manage risk which includes that which could cause work-related ill-health. The HSE can inspect any workplace and take enforcement action against any organisation which does not comply with Health and Safety legislation. The penalties can be both financially and reputationally severe.

Reputation – high levels of stress related to ill-health can damage reputation and make it difficult to recruit and retain high quality staff. A reputation as a caring employer with positive wellbeing initiatives and benefits can help do the opposite.

Step 3 – Establish a Steering Group

Establishment of a steering group can help engage with key stakeholders, utilise available expertise, enable a more coordinated approach and spread the workload. It helps if the steering group is chaired by a senior academic with expertise in the field or by a Health and Wellbeing champion at executive level who can give it gravitas and ensure the work of the steering group is taken into account at senior level – right people in the right place. The HSE report, Tackling work-related stress, provides clear steps in the development of such a group.

The steering group can help produce the institutional risk assessment or could act as a group to challenge and scrutinise it. It should identify the goal or vision that the group wants to achieve, which should be aligned to the University's strategy.

Universities are uniquely placed to take advantage of experts within their academic communities in addition to other colleagues who may have a professional interest and expertise, which is helpful in achieving the objectives of the group. It is important that the steering group is representative of the University and inclusive without being unwieldy. Getting the membership of the steering group right is therefore vital and might include the following:

- Senior academic or executive lead – Chair
- Wellbeing lead
- Health and Safety Advisor (could be Health and Wellbeing Manager/Advisor)
- Occupational Health Manager or representative
- HR Manager or representative
- Union representatives
- Academic Faculties or Schools representatives
- Professional Services representative

The role of existing Health and Safety Committees could also be utilised. Part of their remit would include health, so for some institutions this might be their primary discussion group. For others, the committees could supplement and support the work of the steering group.

Step 4 - Risk Assessment

The **institutional risk assessment** should follow the approach promoted by the HSE, treating the causes of stress as hazards. The assessment should identify how the stressors identified by the Management Standards could affect people in the institution. It should include any available data and information to identify the extent of the issue at this level.

The assessment should identify the inherent risks and any existing controls which are already broadly in place. It should then identify the residual risk and any further controls necessary.

An example of an institutional risk assessment for stress is attached at **Appendix 1.**

Step 5 – Develop an action plan and communicate it

Accompanying any risk assessment should be a SMART action plan. For institutional stress management, a plan will set out the actions necessary to implement the additional controls identified by the assessment. Each action should have an owner, be measurable, realistic and achievable. As such the plan should identify the level of resources required and highlight any foreseeable hurdles including cost. It should include a timeline which will allow a staged approach because trying to achieve too much too quickly can easily result in a poor unsustainable solution. Small manageable outputs are easier to deliver, resource, support and monitor. If the plan is unrealistic then it is likely that people will lose interest along the way which means the plan could fail.

Once the plan is ready, it will need to be communicated so that those within the institution understand why this is important and what the plan aims to achieve.

Step 6 – Develop a clear policy or standard

A policy or standard provides a legal background and impetus, and outlines key roles and responsibilities in addition to laying down a clear message of intent and expectations. It can focus on stress management specifically or take a wider remit such as Health and Wellbeing. The policy should be subject to employee consultation via the institution's Health and Safety Committee and approved by the decision-making body for that institution to demonstrate senior management commitment.

Do

Step 1 – Data Analysis

Sickness absence data can provide a broad overview to inform the institutional risk assessment but can also be further analysed to identify risk at Faculty, School, department and team level. Such data should be considered alongside the rate of staff turnover for those areas and any local arrangements in place such as whether wellbeing and stress management in particular are discussed as part of annual appraisals, regular team meetings and 1:1 meetings.

Data obtained from the staff survey can usually be broken down into Faculty, Schools or Departments which will help inform and prioritise local risk assessments. It might be possible for the data to be analysed in different ways to provide a clear indication as to those people/teams most at risk from work-related stressors although this will depend on the team/company carrying it out.

The use of specific leading and lagging indicators can help identify key areas for improvement. Using **Lag indicators** reflect past performance and enable organisations to identify opportunities for improvement. Lessons can be learnt, and improvements made.

Lead indicators are proactive metrics that give insights into future outcomes by measuring ongoing activities and behaviours. Unlike lag indicators, which reflect past performance, lead indicators focus on factors that predict future trends. By tracking lead indicators, organisations can identify potential issues before they escalate into larger problems. This can lead to better engagement, improved health outcomes, and ultimately a stronger return on investment from wellbeing initiatives.

The following are examples of lead and lag indicators that could be used for managing stress. The list is not exhaustive, and it is important that you select those that are relevant and deemed beneficial to individual organisations.

Lead indicators

- Corporate and Faculty/School/Professional Services stress management risk assessment.
- Attendance at training sessions around mental health and the prevention and management of stress in leadership and management training sessions.
- Feedback from above training sessions.
- Identifying trends from HR data which could include recruitment and retention statistics, return to work interview data, staff and pulse survey results, appraisals data, exit interview data etc. and data from any Equality Impact Assessments completed.
- Needs assessments using the HSE stress indicator tool.
- Data from wellbeing interventions and other proactive measures (e.g. the number of interventions, level of participation and feedback received).
- Use of data metrics such as the ISO 45003 Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks and results of relevant audits.

Lag indicators

- Sickness absence data and trends (both long-term and short-term).
- Occupational health data, for example, management and or self-referrals.
- Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) management information data.
- Exit interviews and turnover rates.

- Workplace incidents related to stress.
- Data from mental health first aiders, wellbeing champions etc.
- It is important to emphasise that effective use of performance data requires a collaborative approach (HR, Health and Safety, EDI, OD etc) and that trade union engagement can be very useful.

Step 2 – Local Process

Clear and agreed processes will help drive consistency of approach across the institution and make it easy for colleagues to follow. Any process for the mitigation of work-related stress should be subject to wide consultation with key stakeholders to ensure the process can be embedded efficiently. A dedicated steering group, if you have one or the Health and Safety Committee is a good starting point.

Step 3 – Develop guidance

You can choose to adopt this USHA guidance as part of your stress management framework/toolkit, but you will still need to provide guidance on your own agreed risk assessment and escalation process. This will give detail to your process diagrams and help ensure a more consistent approach across all areas. Your Health and Safety Committee might a sensible place for governance oversite of any new guidance.

Step 4 – Training

In 2024, IOSH ran a poll to their members asking "what do you believe is the chief cause of stress" with the results showing 48% of respondents saying it was poor line management. Many believed this is due to managers having "little or no training on how to be a good manager". This includes workload management, understanding the stress risk assessment process and empowerment at a local level to make changes. The provision of training at all levels should be a key control measure identified by the institutional risk assessment.

Five types of training are needed to:

1. Support line managers in carrying out a local **risk assessment** for identifying and managing the causes of stress.
2. **Raise awareness** about the causes of stress and encourage self-help among employees.
3. Support local leadership teams to **identify the root causes** and to make fundamental changes in mitigating work-related stress.
4. Raise awareness at an executive level on **the impact their decisions** can have on the mental health and wellbeing of colleagues, ahead of time.
5. **Resilience training** which should be split into three distinct areas: individual resilience, departmental resilience and organisational resilience. This can of course be aligned to work on raising awareness.

The delivery of training will depend on what resources are available and how many people need to have it. A simple option for raising awareness among employees is to use e-learning which can be accessed at any time and used repeatedly if required. This can be supplemented with videos or by those who have suffered from stress-related illness and are willing to talk about it openly. The HSE offer Working Minds and a new module that gives practical advice on:

- what to include in risk assessment
- identifying and addressing the root cause of issues
- shifting focus from individual to organisational solutions

Training for line managers is best undertaken face to face because it enables a practical workshop session to take place alongside a more formal presentation. Training line managers within a large organisation is challenging and might mean the programme has to be broken down into bite-size chunks. Institutional data could help identify how this is prioritised.

The training should focus on the role of line managers in assessing and managing local work-related stressors to enable them to proactively monitor the wellbeing of their direct reports, to implement controls, to support team members and to escalate for further support (e.g. to Occupational Health) as and when necessary.

Training for local leadership teams (faulty/unit level) should focus on how to identify the root causes of stress. Using the HSE's Stress Indicator Tool (SIT) can help inform leadership teams where there are potential problems that need to be addressed.

An example of training can be found in **Appendix 2.**

Step 5 – Local Risk Assessment

To support the institutional level risk assessments, local risk assessments for work-related stress can be very useful. The level at which local assessments are carried out could be determined by the steering group using the data evidence available along with feedback following the HSE's SIT. This might mean Faculty, School, Department or team level and only in areas which have been identified by the data as a 'hotspot'. Similar in many ways to other workplace hazards, the process should aim to be as proactive as possible and easy to follow. Using existing risk assessment practices means that this should already be embedded and won't therefore be perceived as yet another new task for busy line managers.

The risk assessment process which line managers will already be familiar with from the HSE is:

Stage 1 – Identify the hazards
Stage 2 – Decide who might be harmed and how
Stage 3 – Evaluate the risk and determine the control measures
Stage 4 – Record anything which is significant
Stage 5 – Review the assessment and update accordingly
Stage 6 - Open and honest discussion

Enabling open and honest conversations can be difficult but are essential. Some ways in which you might do this are as follows:

- ✓ Include stress management and wellbeing as part of each local Health and Safety Committee or management board. Encourage the attendance of the local wellbeing champion to initiate open discussion and discuss the local activities in place.
- ✓ Establish local focus groups to openly discuss the possible causes of stress within their area of work and what they believe could be done to address it.
- ✓ Nominate wellbeing champions in each School, College, Department to promote positive wellbeing in accordance with the institutional stress management plan.

- ✓ Provide facilitated meetings or events where employees can share their views and openly discuss their feelings or the way they manage their own stress. Anonymous information from the meetings can be used (with permission) to help others or to inform future activities.

Such discussions can be challenging so it may be helpful to provide a link to the HSE's talking toolkit.

Check

Step 1 – Monitoring

As with all other Health and Safety, monitoring is a key activity to help identify whether the implemented controls have been successfully implemented and whether this has had a positive impact on the risk.

At institutional level such monitoring would mean continued analysis of the sickness absence and trend data, comparisons with the next staff survey and qualitative improvements in those areas which were specifically targeted.

Local monitoring should be carried out by the line manager to check that any controls which have been implemented have helped to reduce the potential for work-related stress or its impact. Such controls might include task rotation, change in work pattern, workstation changes, increased autonomy over timescales and way of working, access to counselling etc. Monitoring at this level would form part of the one to one and team meetings.

Step 2 – Audit

Two types of stress audits can be carried out by the Health and Safety team. The first is an early stage one prior to any changes, to get honest feedback from members of a pilot group (one identified service area) as to how stressed they might feel and what they believe causes that stress. The staff survey is an example of this type of audit.

The second type of audit is a late stage one carried out after control measures have been implemented. Its aim is to check that those controls are effective, the process put in place for local risk assessment is being followed by line managers and that employees are accessing the information and support available to them. The audit can also be used to check which Management Standards have been most successfully addressed by the control measures and which may need more consideration.

ACT

Step 1 - Review

Carry out a review of everything put in place up to now. A review at this stage will allow a more objective view of whether the policy, plan, process, training, assessment template etc. is working or needs further amendment. The steering group can help with this and provide both challenge and scrutiny especially in respect of actions where they were not the lead.

Step 2 – Take action

The review should provide some key insight as to the next course of action e.g. tweaking the policy or amending the local risk assessment process. The steering group should provide a useful source of ideas and feedback. Focus groups and wellbeing champions may also be helpful in getting feedback on the effectiveness of the training, information provided, and any improvements already implemented.

Some key points to keep in mind:

- Stress management is often cyclical so be prepared to re-visit and re-assess. Over time the causes of stress may change and thus controls need to change with them.
- Line managers need to accept that they might not be able to control everything.
- Not all stress at work is work-related.

Stress can be an accumulation of several different triggers, some of which can be personal, home or family related. Those relating to employees for work such as demands of workload, relationships, role, level of support, change in practice or environment and level of control an employee may have (i.e. HSE Management Standards) should be recognised and addressed as part of the risk assessment process. Non-work related stress is not within the scope of the employer, but a sympathetic approach can help to demonstrate support albeit that level of support may be limited e.g. flexibility in working pattern or location and family friendly policies. EAPs sometimes provide advice and counselling for those who have personal as well as work-related stress so can be a useful source of support and other wellbeing initiatives may be available.

Key roles in stress management

Overall structure
The following roles reflect those within the USHA Guidance on Leadership and Management and are as follows:

- Governing body
- Executive/Leadership team
- Senior leaders and managers
- Line managers and supervisors

A further role for employees has been included in this guidance to show the important role they play in their own health management.

For each tier or role there are several actions or responsibilities which have been divided according to the stage i.e. plan, do check, act and colour coded for ease of use.

For each tier there is a table showing what the University can expect from their key professionals.

Governing Body

The Governing Body has strategic oversight of all matters related to health and wellbeing for their institution and should seek assurance that effective arrangements are in place and are working.

Plan

- Ensure health and wellbeing matters are communicated in a timely fashion from and to the Governing Body.
- Review your HEI's Wellbeing Strategy/Policy on a regular basis.
- Review your HEI's wellbeing objectives/KPIs on a regular basis.
- Ensure that wellbeing appears regularly on the agenda of Governing Body meetings.
- Be aware of significant wellbeing risks faced by the organisation.
- Consider the wellbeing implications of strategic change proposals such as large projects and ensure that risks associated with change are part of decision making and employee consultation.

Do

Seek assurances that:

- Wellbeing arrangements are adequately resourced.
- There is a means for consulting with the recognised trade unions on matters of Health and Safety.
- Risk control measures are in place and acted on.
- There is an effective process to identify wellbeing training and competency needs in keeping with health and safety responsibilities.
- There is a process for auditing health and safety performance.
- There is a forum for discussing employee wellbeing, championed by a senior member of the leadership team.
- Your HEI has access to competent wellbeing advice in respect of stress as a potential workplace hazard.
- There is a process for employees or their representatives to be involved and engaged in decisions that may substantially affect their wellbeing including consultation with the recognised trade unions.

Check

- Ensure there is a committee of Council to receive and reasonably evaluate leading and lagging data relevant to wellbeing; and where appropriate, ask for data on process and competency indicators.
- Ensure that management systems allow the Governing Body to receive assurances about all University activities including wellbeing.

Act

- To be satisfied that there are regular independent reviews of wellbeing management across the HEI. Regularly review your HEI's health and safety risk profile.
- Regularly review your HEI's wellbeing risk profile.

Support to the Governing Body

Specialist	Stress Management Role
Health and Wellbeing Champion at Executive level	✓ Demonstrates high level support for stress management and mental health. ✓ Can help demonstrate that board level decisions have considered the impact on mental health.
Health and Wellbeing/Mental Health Lead	✓ Provides updates on progress to the governing body. ✓ Acts as the key point of contact.
Health and Safety	✓ Provides data on the management of stress and use of Occupational Health. ✓ Provides assurance to the Governing Body that Health and Safety policy and practice is in place. ✓ Provides assurance that trade unions have been consulted on health and safety in line with Section 2(6) of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 and the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996.
HR	✓ Provides data e.g. on sickness absence, staff surveys, staff turnover etc. ✓ Provides assurance to the Governing Body that HR policy and practice is in place.
Academics with Health and Wellbeing expertise	✓ Can help influence the Governing Body.

Executive/Leadership Team

It is reasonable to expect you will demonstrate the same leadership qualities in health and wellbeing as you do in your academic/professional field. Accountability for ensuring that staff, students, visitors and contractors leave your place of work as healthy as when they arrived, will rest with you, although the operational aspects of this will probably be delegated to other tiers of managers. However, you must implement a process to gain assurances that these responsibilities are being fulfilled.

Plan

- Ensure a wellbeing commitment is included as part of the HEI's health and safety policy statement as a demonstration of ownership and support.
- Agree how wellbeing will be measured, monitored and reported, through the development of appropriate KPIs.
- Allocate sufficient resources to the management of wellbeing.
- Set wellbeing objectives for your institution.
- Ensure that the occupational health service is integrated into your HEI's health and safety management system.
- Determine what wellbeing risks should be included in your institutional risk register.
- Consider the wellbeing implications of strategic decisions of change proposals such as large projects.
- Support the development of a university wide Wellbeing Strategy.
- Ensure there is a process in place for consulting recognised trade union representatives on matters of Health and Safety in accordance with legislation and/or local policy.

Do

- Identify a senior manager to lead on employee wellbeing.
- Ensure there are campaigns to raise wellbeing awareness and behaviour change.
- Discuss wellbeing issues and performance with your direct reports and at performance/development reviews. Lead by example e.g. take an interest in wellbeing and stress management activities.
- Promote the positive behaviours identified by the HSE Management Standards to reduce the risk of employee stress.

Check

- Confirm that your direct reports are aware and have implemented the wellbeing process in their departments.
- Receive and review performance data such as sickness absence and wellbeing KPIs. Check if you are delivering on your own objectives and those set by your leadership team. Use your performance development process for this.
- Review deployment of resources e.g. are they sufficient, competent and effective.

Act

- Review wellbeing performance.
- Celebrate positive achievement and take corrective action where targets are not being met.
- Share the results with staff and students - seek their views on improvements.
- Respond to reports, audits, health and safety committee recommendations trade union safety representatives, regulators, central HR and Health and Safety Advisors.

Support to the Executive/Leadership Team

Specialist	Stress Management Role
Health and Wellbeing Champion at Executive level	✓ Ensures mental health and stress management is considered as part of executive decision-making. ✓ Promotes positive mental health at executive level and sets a good example to colleagues. ✓ Helps to secure funding and resources.
Health and Wellbeing/Mental Health Lead	✓ Key liaison role with the executive team. ✓ Presents findings, data and business case to gain support. ✓ Provides updates from the steering group. ✓ Gets leadership buy-in. ✓ Maintains holistic overview of wellbeing/mental health.
Health and Safety	✓ Fulfils role of Competent Person and thus provides professional advice on the management of stress. ✓ Promote the benefits of stress management. ✓ Get support for the process, templates and policy. ✓ Delivers stress awareness and stress management training ✓ Advises the executive on the legal, moral and financial benefits/disbenefits of stress management. ✓ Provides assurance to the executive that the risk of stress management is part of the Health and Safety management system. ✓ Provides professional advice to the Health and Safety Committee/s. ✓ Leads or lends professional expertise to support any health and wellbeing campaigns. ✓ Interprets and maps staff survey data into the HSE Management Standards. ✓ Analyses sickness absence data to identify incidents of stress in order to target wellbeing support (could also be undertaken by HR). ✓ Promotes good Health and Safety practice through line managers to identify potential stressors and implement risk assessments as appropriate. ✓ Provides advice to ensure that the recognised Trade Union Health and Safety representatives are consulted in accordance with legislation or local policy.
HR	✓ Develops policies and processes to manage sickness absence. ✓ Supports line managers in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities including the identification and management

	of sickness absence through good management behaviour. ✓ Promotes good HR practice such as annual appraisals and regular 1:1 meetings. ✓ Leads and analyses staff survey.
Academics with Health and Wellbeing expertise	✓ Lend weight to support the institution's chosen approach to stress management.
Union Reps/Safety Reps	✓ Can influence executive teams to take action on stress management. ✓ Can challenge executive groups for not taking action.

Senior Managers

As a senior manager you are expected to implement your local wellbeing management arrangements and manage risks to protect staff, students, visitors and contractors working in your faculty/school or department.

Plan

- Align any local wellbeing objectives and plans to the institutional wellbeing plan, policy and process.
- Ensure you have competent support from specialist advisors in respect of wellbeing including Occupational Health, Health and Safety and HR.
- Ensure there are arrangements to discuss and manage wellbeing via a local health and safety committee/forum or as part of senior management meetings.
- Establish wellbeing objectives for your faculty/school/department.
- Ensure staff consultation about wellbeing involves all appropriate stakeholders including trade unions representatives.
- Ensure wellbeing is considered as part of the risk register for your faculty/school /department and escalated as necessary to the executive.

Do

- Ensure responsibilities are delegated and understood for tasks related to wellbeing, such as the completion of sickness absence monitoring and wellbeing assessments.
- Seek advice from relevant wellbeing advisors e.g. Occupational Health, Health and Safety and Human Resources.
- Maintain oversight of sickness absence due to stress.
- Agree wellbeing training needs of all your staff and set a training objective e.g. using a training matrix.

Check

- Check that wellbeing training is provided and undertaken.
- Analyse local sickness absence data to identify emerging trends in the faculty/school or department. Keep staff informed by monitoring progress and actively seek their views on improvements e.g. via your local safety committees.
- Keep staff informed of any wellbeing initiatives and actively seek their views on improvements e.g. via your local Health and Safety committees/forums.
- Check that all actions and recommendations from the institutional wellbeing risk assessment are implemented.

Act

- Review the wellbeing risk management process regularly.
- Take action to implement wellbeing recommendations from the institutional risk assessment.
- Review your own wellbeing and that of your direct reports and celebrate their achievements.
- Use the information to review your local process.

Support to Senior Managers

Specialist	Stress Management Role
Executive Health and Wellbeing Champion	✓ Influences senior managers to embed the stress management process. ✓ Sets a good example. ✓ Engages with senior managers whenever the occasion arises to promote the benefits of positive mental health.
Health and Wellbeing/Mental Health Lead	✓ Undertakes a key liaison role with senior managers. ✓ Engages as members of the steering group. ✓ Gets local leadership buy-in. ✓ Encourages oversight of wellbeing/mental health for each Faculty/School/College/professional service.
Health and Safety	✓ Supports senior managers in ensuring both policy and process are followed. ✓ Helps senior managers to assess risk management performance. ✓ Works with senior managers in identifying local hotspots and developing suitable solutions. ✓ Provides professional health and wellbeing support. ✓ Helps to interpret Occupational Health reports. ✓ Provides professional Health and Safety expertise to support stress management. ✓ Promote good management behaviours and provide support on identifying the actions or inactions that can cause stress in the workplace (could also be undertaken by HR).
HR	✓ Supports senior managers in understanding the level of sickness absence within their Schools/ departments due to stress. ✓ Supports senior managers in ensuring poor performance and behaviour is managed. ✓ Supports senior managers by providing the means to enable good HR practice such as annual appraisals and regular 1:1 meetings which can help reduce the risk from key stressors. ✓ Provides professional HR expertise to support employee management.
Academics with Health and Wellbeing expertise	✓ Provides a good source of local information to help promote the institutions approach to stress management. ✓ Provides specialist input at the local Health and Safety Committee.
Union Reps/Safety Reps	✓ Represents employees at local and institutional Health and Safety Committee(s) chaired by senior managers.

Line Managers

As a line manager in a faculty /school or department you are expected to implement your local health and wellbeing management arrangements, and to monitor and check their effectiveness. The HSE and USHA recognise that the positive management of stress can be heavily influenced by line managers.

Plan

- Promote positive wellbeing within your team using any tools and techniques available to you.
- Be aware of your behaviours and management style and the impact this may have on your employees.
- Plan regular 1:1 meetings and team meetings throughout the year.
- Familiarise yourself with the HSE's Management Standards and this guidance.
- Set reasonable wellbeing objectives to cover your area of responsibility.
- Develop or use existing communication processes (e.g. team meetings) to keep your team informed and receive information back from team members.

Do

- Implement University policy within your team or area of responsibility.
- Attend any stress management and line management training provided to you.
- Carry out regular 1:1 meetings with each team member and listen to their concerns.
- Make all team members aware of any stress awareness training and tools available.
- Carry out a wellbeing assessment for those who need it.
- Implement your local Health and Safety policy and arrangements.
- Carry out the Health and Safety plan and objectives.

Check

- Monitor sickness absence within your team.
- Carry out return to work meetings following sickness absence and identify any reasonable adjustments necessary.
- Seek advice from your HR and/or Health and Safety professional.

Act

- Provide feedback to the team on the action you have taken.
- Review progress.

Support to Line Managers

Specialist	Stress Management Role
Executive Health and Wellbeing Champion	✓ Sets a good example to all line managers by following the institution's agreed way of managing the risk of stress. Demonstrates senior commitment by attending and supporting health and wellbeing campaigns and events.
Health and Safety	✓ Develops the process, templates and policy. ✓ Supports line managers in the production of stress-related risk assessments including the development of templates and process and the implementation of mitigation measures. ✓ Delivers training on identifying and managing stress. ✓ Provides advice to line managers on the impact of stress and identification of stressors. ✓ Explains the HSE's Management Standards. ✓ Deliver and communicate health and wellbeing campaigns and initiatives.
Occupational Health	✓ Provides clinical advice upon request. ✓ Suggests reasonable adjustments. ✓ May support wellbeing initiatives.
HR	✓ Supports line managers in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities including the promotion of positive management behaviours and good practice, the management of sickness absence, and poor performance and behaviour. ✓ Supports the line manager in making a referral to Occupational Health. ✓ Advises on the implementation of HR policies such as flexible working and family friendly policies. ✓ Promotes good HR practice such as annual appraisals and regular 1:1 meeting which can help line managers to reduce the risk from key stressors.
Academics with Health and Wellbeing expertise	✓ Can be line manager. ✓ Can use their specialist research knowledge to influence line management colleagues.
Union Reps/Safety Reps	✓ Helps promote the union perspective. ✓ Supports a joint approach to reduce conflict between line managers and employees.

Employees

Plan

Familiarise yourself with the policies and process available within your institution for managing positive mental health and stress management.

Do

- Maintain a healthy lifestyle.
- Be alert to changing work environments and seek to adapt or raise concerns with your line manager.
- Practice mindfulness or calming techniques.
- Seek help and support if you feel you need it from your GP.
- Seek help and support if you feel you need it from your recognised trade union representative or other staff representative.
- Participate in a stress risk assessment if asked to do so or if you request one.
- Cooperate with your line manager if he/she is trying to implement positive changes to support you.
- Identify and use coping mechanisms.
- Make line managers aware of any potential stressors in the workplace.

Check

- Monitor your own wellbeing by taking the stress self-awareness test routinely.
- Be aware of your changing surroundings and potential stressors.
- Look out for your colleagues and the impact that change, or the work environment may be having on them.

Act

- Don't delay in seeking additional help if you need it.
- Follow the recommendations provided by your line manager, GP, counsellor.

Support to Employees

Specialist	Stress Management Role
Executive Health and Wellbeing Champion	✓ Demonstrates that the Executive group takes the issue of stress management very seriously and includes the impact within decision-making. ✓ Attends stress/mental health promotions and participates in campaigns. ✓ Speaks up and support the mental health/stress management agenda.
Health and Safety	✓ Provides signposting to helpful resources. ✓ Provides clear guidance, policy and process to support positive mental health and stress awareness. ✓ Supports employees in enabling confidential discussions about their work environment. ✓ Delivers training on stress awareness and self-management. ✓ Explains the HSE Management Standards. ✓ Delivers and communicates wellbeing campaigns and initiatives. ✓ Provides professional advice and guidance on Health and Safety policy and practice.
Occupational Health	✓ Provide clinical advice upon request based on self-referral. ✓ Supports positive mental health by suggesting reasonable adjustments. ✓ May support wellbeing initiatives.
HR	✓ Provides clear guidance, policy and process to support the employee lifecycle. ✓ Provides professional advice and guidance on HR policy and practice.
Academics with Health and Wellbeing expertise	✓ Can use their specialist knowledge to influence colleagues. ✓ Credibility among other academics.
Union Reps/Safety Reps	✓ Can help influence their members to adopt and use the process provided.

References and Resources

USHA

Leadership and Management of Health and Safety in Higher Education Institutions (USHA/UCEA, 2024)

UCEA (member only)

Stress and mental wellbeing resources for Higher Education Institutions
Health, safety and wellbeing case studies
Sickness absence survey reports
Employee Experience resources

HSE

The HSE Management Standards
HSE Working Minds Campaign
Tackling work-related stress using the Management Standards approach (HSE, 2017)
Work-related stress, depression, or anxiety statistics in Great Britain (HSE, 2024).

General

Thriving at Work – the Stevenson/Farmer Review of mental health and employers (Stevenson/Farmer, 2017)
Stepchange: mentally healthy universities (UUK, 2023)

Appendix 1 – Example Stress Risk Assessment (a blank template is available on the USHA website)

This risk assessment identified the **SIGNIFICANT** organisational level risks to staff from work-related stress whilst working on campus, and undertaking University operations away from campus, it does not cover activities such as commuter travelling to and from campus or activities that are not work activities carried out in peoples own time. More detailed risk assessments will be developed for each college, school, department, and professional service area as required.

The risk assessment recognises that we cannot completely remove all risks of workplace stress, however the University will ensure that all reasonable precautions to ensure that university working environments are as safe as reasonably practicable. By following the guidance from the Health and Safety Executive, this risk assessment will consider the six main areas of work design which can affect stress levels; demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.

A risk assessment is an important tool that is used to identify work activities that could foreseeably cause harm to staff, students, visitors or members of the public. A risk assessment is a logical process which analyses each work activity to identify aspects of that activity that could cause harm, the hazards.

However it is important to remember that the presence of a hazard does not mean that it **WILL** cause harm to a person, the likelihood of stress causing harm depends on many factors; the frequency of the activity, the numbers of people exposed to stress, the level of training and other wellbeing and safety mitigations being used and the degree to which stress is being controlled. The impact of any harm that may be suffered is also important as the greater the level of potential harm the greater our desire to prevent it. These two factors, **likelihood** and **impact** are collectively use

d to **ESTIMATE** the level of risk referred to as the risk rating.

Once we have identified potential hazards and estimated the magnitude of the risk, we then need to decide what, if any further actions are needed to reduce the risk so far as is reasonably practicable.

Likelihood		Meaning in practice	Example Scenario
1	Rare	Exceptional circumstances; almost never happens	Stress arising from a one-off crisis, e.g. evacuation due to fire alarm
2	Unlikely	Could happen, but not typical	Brief friction in a well-supported team during organisational change
3	Possible	Might occur depending on conditions	Pressure during exam season or major deadline cycles
4	Likely	Happens with some regularity	Team tension due to persistent role ambiguity or staffing shortages
5	Very Likely	Expected frequently or in most similar settings	Chronic stress from unmanaged workloads or long-standing poor leadership

LIKELIHOOD						
	5	5	10	15	20	25
	4	4	8	12	16	20
	3	3	6	9	12	15
	2	2	4	6	8	10
	1	1	2	3	4	5
		1	2	3	4	5
		IMPACT				

Impact (severity of harm)		Meaning in practice	Example Scenario
1	Trivial	Temporary discomfort or low-level tension with no lasting impact	Feeling slightly pressured during a short busy period
2	Minor	Noticeable stress symptoms, manageable without formal intervention	Brief irritability or sleep disturbance during project deadlines
3	Moderate	Sustained symptoms requiring informal support or adjustments	Anxiety, fatigue, or mild burnout affecting work consistency
4	Major	Severe symptoms needing medical attention or long-term recovery	Depression or anxiety disorder linked to chronic workload pressure
5	Severe	Life-altering psychological harm or suicide risk	Post-traumatic stress following workplace bullying or harassment

Risk Score	Risk Level	Action Required
(1 - 3)	Insignificant	No further action
(4 - 6)	Low	Monitor
(7 - 10)	Moderate	Review assessment and monitor
(12 - 19)	High	Review assessment and improve controls
20+	Very High	Stop this activity until further action is taken

Like other documents relating to personal safety this risk assessment is a dynamic and developing position that will be reviewed and updated as the University follows guidance from the HSE and sector specific requirements.

Clarifications, questions and support related to this risk assessment are available from the Health and Safety Unit.

Activities that are likely to cause an increase in work-related stress.	Consequences of an increase in work-related stress	Who is at risk?	What is currently in place to prevent this increase in work-related stress from happening (control measures)?	Initial Likelihood	Initial Severity	Initial Risk Rating	What further action is required to reduce the risk of work-related stress to an acceptable level?	Who is responsible for this action? action	Timescales to complete this action	Revised Likelihood	Revised Severity	Revised Risk Rating
DEMANDS – this includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment. *(please add extra lines as needed)*												
Issues can arise from several factors, including; • Staff Overworked • Skills Requirement • Work Environment • Long Working Hours • Taking Work Home			• Staff have legally contracted hours or an agreed notional working week – hours reflect contractual arrangements • Working practices exist to allow staff to have appropriate or routine breaks from their work (Demands could peak at specific times of the year, graduation, clearing etc – a local risk assessment for stress would be required at these times for relevant departments and business areas)	3	3	9	*Management to ensure there are systems in place to encourage staff to talk to them at an early stage if they feel they are unable to cope with the demands of their role.*			2	2	4

Activities that are likely to cause an increase in work-related stress.	Consequences of an increase in work-related stress	Who is at risk?	What is currently in place to prevent this increase in work-related stress from happening (control measures)?	Initial Likelihood	Initial Severity	Initial Risk Rating	What further action is required to reduce the risk of work-related stress to an acceptable level?	Who is responsible for this action? action	Timescales to complete this action	Revised Likelihood	Revised Severity	Revised Risk Rating
CONTROL - how much say the person has in the way they do their work *(please add extra lines as needed)*												
Issues can arise from several factors, including; • Pace of work • How work is undertaken • Skills development • Learning New Skills • Participate in Decision Making • Work Patterns and breaks			• The University is an educational institution where staff development is actively encouraged • Local processes and procedures exist to ensure staff have access to management and the support functions such as People and Culture or Occupational Health	3	3	9	*Managers need to ensure adequate communication and consultation mechanisms exist within their department, function or team to encourage staff participation in decision making.*			2	2	4

Activities that are likely to cause an increase in work-related stress.	Consequences of an increase in work-related stress	Who is at risk?	What is currently in place to prevent this increase in work-related stress from happening (control measures)?	Initial Likelihood	Initial Severity	Initial Risk Rating	What further action is required to reduce the risk of work-related stress to an acceptable level?	Who is responsible for this action? action	Timescales to complete this action	Revised Likelihood	Revised Severity	Revised Risk Rating
SUPPORT - this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the university, line management and colleagues *(please add extra lines as needed)*												
Issues can arise from several factors, including; • Availability of line manager support • Availability of colleague support • Individual Support • Access to required resources • Lack of constructive feedback • Lack of honest communication			• All new staff have a local Health and Safety induction. Specific on the job training is provided locally as appropriate • The University actively encourages its staff to talk to their managers about work-related stress or other mental health issues	3	2	6	Management and supervisors must ensure that staff are supported when returning to work after a period of absence. A discussion should take place, which should be documented. The HSE Talking Toolkit can be used to lead a structured discussion.			2	1	3

Activities that are likely to cause an increase in work-related stress.	Consequences of an increase in work-related stress	Who is at risk?	What is currently in place to prevent this increase in work-related stress from happening (control measures)?	Initial Likelihood	Initial Severity	Initial Risk Rating	What further action is required to reduce the risk of work-related stress to an acceptable level?	Who is responsible for this action? action	Timescales to complete this action	Revised Likelihood	Revised Severity	Revised Risk Rating
RELATIONSHIPS - this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour *(please add extra lines as needed)*												
Issues can arise from several factors, including; • Lack of systems implemented to deal with: ○ Unacceptable behaviour ○ Disciplinary or grievances • Employees do not know how to report issues • Lack of ability to share information with their line manager Lack of good working relationship with their manager			• Management and staff are expected to adhere to the relevant policies and procedures e.g. bullying and harassment, grievance, disciplinary, etc • The University has an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion function to help support staff resolve any specific issues	3	2	6	Managers and Supervisors to be provide with training to ensure they; • Develop Coaching skills • Develop Communication skills • Create Team Building events			2	1	3

Activities that are likely to cause an increase in work-related stress.	Consequences of an increase in work-related stress	Who is at risk?	What is currently in place to prevent this increase in work-related stress from happening (control measures)?	Initial Likelihood	Initial Severity	Initial Risk Rating	What further action is required to reduce the risk of work-related stress to an acceptable level?	Who is responsible for this action? action	Timescales to complete this action	Revised Likelihood	Revised Severity	Revised Risk Rating
ROLE - whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the university ensures that they do not have conflicting roles *(please add extra lines as needed)*												
Issues can arise from several factors, including; • Lack of clarity of role and responsibilities • Employees don't understand expectation • Conflict exists between role and expectation • Employee can raise concerns • Personal ability and attributes • Inadequate training and induction			• Managers and supervisors of departments or functions are expected to ensure staff clearly understand their role and what is required of them • Regular staff team meetings and one-to one meetings are undertaken as required	4	3	12	Access to occupational health services or counselling should be brought to the attention of staff as appropriate by management or the People and Culture team when issues arise.			3	2	6

Activities that are likely to cause an increase in work-related stress.	Consequences of an increase in work-related stress	Who is at risk?	What is currently in place to prevent this increase in work-related stress from happening (control measures)?	Initial Likelihood	Initial Severity	Initial Risk Rating	What further action is required to reduce the risk of work-related stress to an acceptable level?	Who is responsible for this action? action	Timescales to complete this action	Revised Likelihood	Revised Severity	Revised Risk Rating
CHANGE - how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the university *(please add extra lines as needed)*												
Issues can arise from several factors, including; • Failure to provide timely information • Inadequate employee consultation / change • Lack of opportunity to influence change • Lack of employee support during change process • Role changes are not explained • Defined job description does not exist			Managers and supervisors are expected to clearly explain to their teams what the organisation wants to achieve and why it is essential that any specific changes tale place	4	4	16	Management and supervisors should monitor closely staff behaviour following a change process and provide clarify of expectation as appropriate, along with the relevant support to individuals			3	3	9
OTHER ORGANISATIONAL RISKS												

Appendix 2 - Training

Below is a non-exhaustive list of training that could be considered by HEIs. Of course, as much in-house and face to face training should be available as possible using a variety of means of delivery such as short lunch-and-learn sessions, workshops with interactive activities, E-learning modules and peer support groups. HEIs should check with their own organisational development teams to establish what training can be made available through internal resources.

Leadership Training

- IOSH Leading Safely

Management Training

- NEBOSH / HSE Certificate in Managing Stress at Work
- HSE: Working Minds

In house employee training topics might include:

- Mental health awareness
- Understanding stress
- Heathy lifestyles for stress reduction
- Mindfulness, relaxation and other stress management techniques
- Digital wellbeing

USHA Universities Safety and Health Association

USHA Administrator Telephone: 07903 538517
Email: admin@usha.org.uk
Website: www.usha.org.uk

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This guidance can be downloaded from the www.usha.org.uk website.