



*HE SECTOR  
HEALTH, SAFETY  
AND WELLBEING  
STRATEGIC  
FRAMEWORK  
2022-25*



## Foreword

Whilst always important, the focus on health, safety and wellbeing has sharply intensified over the last couple of years. We expect this to continue into the near future and have devised a strategic framework for the period 2022-2025 which will frame our own and our stakeholders' efforts and be of benefit to the sector.

This framework builds on the excellent work undertaken in the Higher Education sector and in particular our 2016-20 Health, Safety and Wellbeing strategy. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2016-20 strategy was extended into 2021 with an increased focus on addressing the challenges that arose as a result of the pandemic.

Following an extremely busy (and successful) year for Higher Education professionals working in health, safety and wellbeing, we feel it is the right time to build on the learning from the pandemic and look forward positively and identify key areas of focus for the coming four years.

The UCEA Health and Safety Committee brings together the sector's key stakeholders in the area of health, safety and wellbeing and acts as a central point for discussion of health and safety matters relating to staff and students within the Higher Education (HE) sector.

In developing this new strategic framework, we have reflected on the excellent and innovative work that the sector associations represented on UCEA's Health and Safety Committee have achieved to support those in the sector. UCEA has engaged positively with those external to the sector in order to establish good practice and internally with the sector trade unions through the Higher Education Safety and Health (HESH) Forum. The latter has resulted in an improved approach in delivering joint principles and outputs for the sector. Some of the key outputs from Health and Safety Committee members included:

- **Principles for working safely on campus during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic:** these were published jointly by UCEA and the sector trade unions in June 2020 and updated in October 2021.
- **Joint statement to encourage the uptake of vaccinations across the Higher Education sector,** published by UCEA and the sector trade unions on 25 March 2021 and updated in October 2021.
- **Joint statement between UCEA and the HE trade unions on Covid-19 testing for Staff,** published by UCEA and the sector trade unions on 25 May 2021 and updated in October 2021.
- **Joint stress and mental wellbeing resources pack,** published by UCEA and the sector trade unions, updated in November 2020.
- **Template escalation procedure:** developed by USHA, in consultation with the sector trade unions and UCEA. The procedure outlines appropriate channels for staff to use to raise concerns about health and safety on campus.
- **Guidance on Ventilation as a Control Measure in Managing the Spread of COVID-19,** developed by USHA for HEIs in 2021.
- **Guidance on managing staff return to campus:** developed by UCEA, with input from members of the Health and Safety Committee. The guidance for HEIs includes chapters on health and safety, and on managing the psychological transition back to the workplace.
- **Case studies from HEIs on their approaches to support staff mental wellbeing,** published in September 2021.

Many of our members have developed novel approaches in order to deal with the challenges the sector faces and, through UCEA, have ensured that such good practice is disseminated rapidly.

## HE Sector Health Safety and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-25: our themes

We have identified five themes which will form the core of this strategic framework. Given the nature of the HE sector, these themes have the potential to overlap and the interplay between them in future challenges will be important. Notwithstanding this, the themes are outlined separately below, with detailed commentary provided later. It is also worth noting that at the time of writing, the UK is still living with the pandemic, and this should be borne in mind as the future unfolds. Hence, *emerging from the pandemic*, has been identified as a golden thread which we feel will be of fundamental importance during the timeframe lifetime of this strategic framework.

The future is uncertain and the pace at which the sector is changing is considerable. Thus, we have chosen to provide a strategic framework rather than a strategy with specific actions. However, it is envisaged that this framework will help guide the actions which we will develop in our annual action plans. It is our intention to develop the action plans in consultation with the Health and Safety Committee, who will monitor progress against the plans each year. Such action plans will be disseminated to all Higher Education Institutions through the UCEA website, and progress against the actions will be summarised in the annual UCEA Health and Safety reports.

### Golden thread:

Emerging from the pandemic

### Themes:

1. [Wellbeing](#)
2. [Embedding health, safety and wellbeing in decision making.](#)
3. [Health and safety in a hybrid working context](#)
4. [Fire safety](#)
5. [Business resilience and emergency preparedness](#)

## Theme 1: Wellbeing

*This theme covers mental and physical wellbeing, and empowering staff to take ownership of their own wellbeing.*

For the purposes of this document, we interpret wellbeing as the quality of life associated with the experiences and conditions of working and studying in universities. This includes both mental and physical wellbeing. To ensure effective wellbeing is delivered at work requires a true partnership with staff; a partnership where staff feel empowered to take ownership of their personal wellbeing whilst also focussing attention on the wellbeing of the students they interact with.

The World Health Organisation states that wellbeing is, “a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” A holistic approach to wellbeing is therefore recommended. A good wellbeing programme does not just focus on employee ill health but has elements which promote, develop and maintain overall good health. HEIs have worked to protect the physical wellbeing of staff throughout the pandemic with risk assessments and subsequent control measures, but physical wellbeing also requires individuals to take personal responsibility for their health and lifestyle choices. HEIs have also introduced more innovative ways of supporting mental and physical health for staff, as demonstrated by the numerous case studies collated by UCEA.

The UCEA Health and Safety Committee’s key areas of focus will include:

- Supporting HEIs to create a supportive and open culture that normalises conversations about mental and physical wellbeing.
- Providing support to HEIs to implement and sustain a whole university approach to wellbeing, led by senior leaders and which encompasses workplace culture, communications and employee voice; recognises and supports the role of line managers in workplace wellbeing including effective workload management; and raises awareness of appropriate support.
- Supporting the development and sharing of good practice and innovation in mental and physical wellbeing at work.
- Encouraging learning from beyond the HE sector.
- Working with relevant sector organisations on new or revised wellbeing resources and guidance materials and supporting dissemination throughout the sector.
- Considering whether specific support is required for HEIs in relation to long Covid ill-health.

## Theme 2: Embedding health, safety and wellbeing in decision making

It is important that the gains made in terms of the centrality of health and safety are not lost in the coming years. There is an opportunity to embed health, safety and wellbeing in decision-making at an HEI-level, and at Departmental levels, such that these considerations form a natural but explicit part of the formal and informal processes.

Throughout the pandemic, HEIs have ensured that decisions have been informed by considerations for the health, safety and wellbeing of their staff and students. Stakeholders are more familiar with the concepts of risk assessments and control measures, and their importance for decisions around business operations. HEIs have involved staff representatives in risk assessment processes and have been transparent with the outcomes. HEIs have also revisited their health and safety strategies, in many cases widening them to explicitly encompass mental wellbeing and have enhanced their offerings to staff and students. HEIs have also built and enhanced relationships with external stakeholders including Directors of Public Health, local NHS providers and local authorities, and there is an opportunity now to build on this progress.

The UCEA Health and Safety Committee's key areas of focus in this theme will include:

- Equipping senior leaders to understand the priority and to act with confidence and capability in relation to health, safety and wellbeing.
- Considering how lessons can be learned from the pandemic with a view to consolidating gains made in terms of awareness of, and leadership in, health and safety.
- Consolidating gains made in terms of understanding of, and conducting, risk assessments.

### Theme 3: Health and safety in a hybrid working context

As the HE sector develops new ways of working, the Health and Safety Committee will monitor and respond to developments in this space and share good practice. This theme will by definition require a high degree of flexibility in approach, given the vast array of different types of hybrid working policies that operate and develop across the sector. This theme is centred around securing and maintaining the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals during a period of ongoing change.

The first theme of our UCEA HE Sector Level, Health, Safety and Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2020 focused on Culture which acknowledged the strong links between wellbeing, attendance and organisational culture. As hybrid working is trialled and adapted for many, maintaining these strong links will continue to be necessary in securing the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals. The Health and Safety Committee will work with appropriate stakeholders to interpret and circulate to our members any emergent guidance from the Health and Safety Executive, Acas and government departments, for example, that may be forthcoming.

In August 2021, UCEA published Return to campus Guidance which included a focus on hybrid working and the psychological transition individuals will have already had to make. UCEA plans to build on this guidance, working with members of the Health and Safety Committee, to share examples of innovative practice and signpost HE employers to any foreseeable health and safety issues that may arise in a hybrid working context.

Key areas of focus will include:

- Keeping HEIs informed of good practice within and beyond the sector and sharing feedback on the impact of the positive and negative H&S aspects of hybrid working scenarios.
- Considering health and safety issues related to equipment for hybrid working.
- Considering the mental health implications of remote working, remote line management and the impact on team dynamics.
- Seeking to ensure that hybrid work environments are inclusive and accessible.
- Supporting HEIs in developing employees' personal sense of responsibility for health and safety when working off-campus.
- Ensuring that staff feel safe on campus, so the safety concerns do not drive individuals' choices about their work location.
- Addressing safety issues associated with hybrid working and having fewer staff present on campus, such as lone working and fire procedures.
- Improving engagement with risk assessments and compliance.

## Theme 4: Fire safety

Since the shocking fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017 and the subsequent student residential fire in Bolton in November 2019, there has been a measured escalation in compliance on improving fire and building safety. This increase has been come in the form of the [Building Safety Bill](#) and the [Fire Safety Act](#).

Fire outbreaks within our academic, residential or commercial buildings present a real and significant risk to people, the environment and consequently the sector's core business of teaching, learning and research. There is a requirement placed on HEIs to reduce, assess, and manage the fire risks posed due to the structure and the management of the property and the activities they perform. As such:

- HEIs have a duty to assess and recognise the impact of the material risk across the estate, then develop long and short-term plans to mitigate the risk.
- Ensure that access is available to the required competency levels in relation to risk assessment and the management of fire safety.
- Within a fire risk management system, deliver operational practices and training that are fit for purpose and reflect the new ways of working emerging from the pandemic.

Areas of focus of this strategic framework will include:

- Supporting HEIs with meeting the above requirements and the implications of the Fire Safety Act 2021 (England and Wales) and the impending Building Safety Bill.
- Supporting HEIs with managing the infrastructure challenges that may come into view and integrating fire safety controls into the new ways of working that have emerged from the pandemic i.e., addressing fire marshal requirements.

## Theme 5: Business resilience and emergency preparedness

As a result of the pandemic, HEIs' business continuity plans and processes were tested to the limit. However, this was not a short-lived incident, but a much longer-term, evolving disruption with wide-reaching implications for the ways in which HEIs deliver their work. The situation underscored the significance of having business continuity processes in place and properly supported, and the sector should not lose sight of this as it emerges from the pandemic.

Business resilience will naturally interlink with the other four themes in this strategy, as HEIs will only be prepared for future emergencies if HEIs have:

- Addressed their staff wellbeing, particularly following what will have been an exhausting period for many.
- Embedded health, safety and wellbeing into decision-making, so that risk management planning includes consideration of wellbeing and resilience.
- Considered change issues associated with any development of hybrid working, including cultural changes, technological changes and operational changes.
- Ensured that their estates are safe and compliant.

Areas of focus for the Health and Safety Committee will therefore include:

- Working with the Higher Education Business Continuity Network (HEBCoN), which has recently joined the Committee, to seek to ensure that business resilience issues are considered as part of health, safety and wellbeing considerations.
- Incorporating learning from the pandemic into plans for responses to, and control of, communicable diseases.
- Building on partnerships with external stakeholders, including local directors of public health.
- Consolidating lessons learned from the pandemic, from a business continuity perspective.
- Supporting HEIs in embedding business continuity planning in decision-making.



## Bringing the Strategic Framework to life

Given the recent upheaval from the Covid-19 pandemic, this Strategic Framework has been developed with the intention of providing flexibility and avoiding overly prescriptive objectives at the outset. We have, however, sought to provide a framework to enable UCEA and the Health and Safety Committee to plan work in the most appropriate areas as the HE sector emerges from the pandemic.

UCEA will work with the Health and Safety Committee to develop more detailed annual action plans, outlining specific activities to be undertaken in the coming year, in line with the themes in the Strategy. The Committee will then review progress against the annual plans, and UCEA will report outcomes in the annual Health and Safety Reports.

To assist the Committee in developing Action Plans which reflect the sector's needs, we would welcome feedback and contributions from individual institutions throughout the course of this Strategic Framework.

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