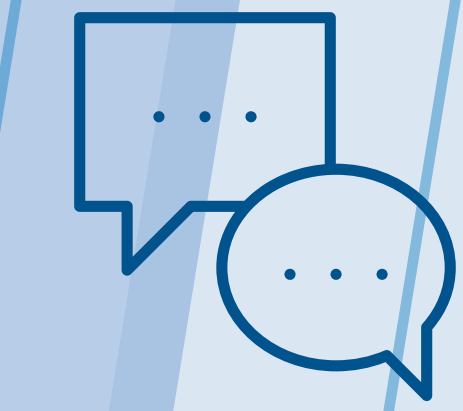
UCEA UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES EMPLOYERS ASSOCIATION







HEALTH AND SAFETY ANNUAL REPORT 2025



Health and Safety Annual Report 2025

1. Introduction

UCEA's strategic plan, Facilitating transformational change, Enhancing the employee experience 2024-2027 leads with *Strategic priority 1: 'Supporting employer aspirations to enhance the EX*'. This priority recognises that employee health, safety and wellbeing is central to the employee experience. UCEA's work in this area over the last calendar year included:

- Convening the UCEA Health and Safety Committee which brings together professional groups in the sector with an interest and expertise in health, safety and wellbeing matters. UCEA publishes an annual Action Plan to capture key pieces of work that these groups are undertaking over the course of the year, and this is regularly monitored by the Committee. **See Sections 3 and 4**.
- Facilitating the Higher Education Safety and Health Forum (HESH) which aims to develop partnership working between the employer and joint trade unions, and to provide a strategic oversight on matters of workplace health and safety issues in the sector, as well as an opportunity for informal discussion. Members of HESH also include representatives from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Universities Safety and Health Association (USHA). **See Section 5**.
- Running events such as the annual Health, Safety and Wellbeing Conference to keep members informed of key issues within the HE sector and wider economy, share good practice and provide networking opportunities. **See Section 4**.
- Sharing information and good practice through surveys, reports, case studies and infographics. These enable member HEIs to benchmark sickness absence and HE sector benefits (including 'family friendly' benefits and those related to sickness absence) and help to inform their design and implementation of health and wellbeing strategies and initiatives.
- Progressing work on workload management, pay gaps, and contract types, which have a direct impact on the employee experience with potential health, safety and wellbeing implications, with a view to completing this work in early 2026.
- Responding to Government consultations on changes to relevant employment legislation.

This report provides an overview of:

- The activities of UCEA, its partner organisations, and the sector with reference to the annual Health, Safety and Wellbeing Action Plan 2025, based on the strategic priorities set out in UCEA's HE Sector Health Safety and Wellbeing Strategic Framework for 2022-25. See **Section 4**.
- The new UCEA Health, Safety and Wellbeing Strategic Framework 2026-27. **See Section 2**.
- Topics discussed by the UCEA Health and Safety Committee and the Higher Education Safety and Health Forum (HESH) in 2025. **See Sections 3 and 5**.
- Key findings from UCEA's annual absence survey for the period 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025. See **Section 6**.
- Summary accident and injury statistics for the past five years, based on data collected by the Universities Safety and Health Association (USHA). **See Section 7.**

2. UCEA Health, Safety and Wellbeing Strategic Framework 2026-27

UCEA has made the decision to incorporate Health, Safety and Wellbeing into its Employee Experience work, rather than having a standalone strategic framework as in previous years. As mentioned above, this reflects the importance of employee health, safety and wellbeing to an employee's experience. The new Health, Safety and Wellbeing Strategic Framework for the period 2026-27, is aligned with the timeframe of UCEA's overall Strategic Plan. The two-year Strategy focuses on *Pillar One: Promoting good employment practice in the areas of learning and development, safety at work and physical, mental health and wellbeing* and *Pillar Two: Supporting*

employers in their transformation and organisational change agendas, building flexibility into workforce models to meet the business needs. The framework covers four specific themes:

- Creating a safety culture
- Organisational change
- Support for the inclusive workplace
- Regulatory landscape

The Health, Safety and Wellbeing Action Plan 2026, currently in development, will draw on these four themes.

3. UCEA Health and Safety Committee

UCEA Health and Safety Committee membership

The Committee is chaired by Mike Parker (Chair of Board of Governors at Liverpool John Moores University and a UCEA Board Member). It reports to the UCEA Board and meets twice a year (in May and November) to consider topical issues arising in the sector over the course of the year. Full details of the membership and terms of reference of the Committee are provided in **Appendices 1 and 2**.

In 2025, discussions included the following:

- **Health, Safety and Wellbeing Action Plan 2025**: the Plan was developed through consultation with the Committee, and in the main, successfully completed (see **Section 3** below).

- **Staff mental health and wellbeing**: Staff mental health remained a key priority throughout the year, as in previous years. Discussions included:

    - Institutional responses to the financial pressures facing the sector from a health, safety and wellbeing perspective, including workload and work-related stress. Members of the Committee reported that various wellbeing initiatives are in place within their own institutions to support staff including occupational health services, EAPs, wellbeing events, management information, staff briefings on stress, hybrid working and staff network groups.
    - HSE investigations of stress within the sector were also discussed, together with details of the support provided by UCEA and USHA to institutions affected which included two online events and a Briefing note on Responding to HSE investigations of the management of stress
    - The Committee was given the opportunity to comment on the revision of the USHA Guidance on the management of work-related stress within the Higher Education sector, which was launched in October 2025. This new version reflects the HSE's current approach to stress management – that organisational level risk assessments should be undertaken as part of a proactive approach to the management of stress.
    - UCEA has continued to support its members in the form of practical resources and the sharing of good practice, for example, through the delivery of topical sessions at the UCEA annual Health and Safety Conference. The 2025 UCEA Health and Safety Conference included sessions on *Monitoring the effectiveness of health and wellbeing initiatives, The impact of organisational change on health, safety and wellbeing, including psychological safety,* and *Communicating health and wellbeing initiatives to raise awareness and reach a diverse workforce*.

- **Legal developments**: The Committee continued to monitor legislative changes that will impact the HE sector including the Terrorism (Protection of premises) Act 2025, known as Martyn's Law. The Act received Royal Assent on 3 April 2025, with enforcement expected in April 2027. The Supreme Court ruling on the definition of "sex" in the Equality Act was also discussed in terms of the practical implications of the judgement for institutions, such as the implications for single-sex spaces, including workplace toilets and changing facilities.

4. HE Sector level Health, Safety and Wellbeing – Action Plan 2025

Actions taken in 2025

Notable activities undertaken by UCEA and other Committee members through their sector associations under the Action Plan for 2025 include:

- UCEA held a successful Health, Safety and Wellbeing conference in June 2025. A wide range of topics were covered including *Embedding the new Leadership and Management of Health and Safety Standards* and a case-study on *Developing and implementing a new workplace health and safety governance framework at the University of York;* in addition to sessions on wellbeing-related topics as mentioned above.
- UCEA continued to develop its Employee Experience work and shared resources, case studies and knowledge in the area of employee wellbeing.

The following actions are ongoing and will be included in the Action Plan for 2026:

- **UCEA to publish its Benefits of Working in HE Report (2025**): This is due to be published in the Spring 2026.
- **Develop joint guidance on carrying out risk assessments for home working**.

5. Higher Education Safety and Health Forum (HESH)

The HESH Forum, also chaired by Mike Parker, is a tripartite structure between UCEA (as the employers' representative), the trade unions and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Full membership details and terms of reference are given in **Appendix 3**.

The HESH Forum met on two occasions during 2025, and issues discussed included the following:

- The revision of the USHA Guidance on the management of work-related stress within the Higher Education sector and the incorporation of the HSE's current expectation that employers take a proactive, not reactive, approach to the management of stress which should include organisational risk assessments. The HESH Forum were given the opportunity to comment on the guidance prior to its publication in October 2025.
- HSE investigations of stress in the HE sector, together with the support being offered by USHA and UCEA to institutions (as described in **Section 3** above). The importance of Health and Safety teams, management and trade unions working collaboratively to resolve concerns was emphasised, with HSE referral being a last resort. The revised USHA Guidance, mentioned above, includes guidance on how to escalate concerns regarding work-related stress internally.
- The role of safety representatives in HEIs. The importance of ensuring that safety representatives are able to fulfil their roles and responsibilities under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 was discussed (e.g. in relation to accident investigations, membership of relevant committees, and time off). A guidance document *Joint working with trade unions for healthier and safer workplaces,* was developed by USHA and the HESH Forum were given opportunities to contribute to this. It is intended that this will be finalised and published in Spring 2026.

- Asbestos management in the HE sector. Discussions related to whether asbestos audits are being carried out, relevant information is being shared, and maintenance adequate. The employer representatives' view was that asbestos is generally well managed, exposure risk is very low, HEIs have removal programmes in place, and asbestos information must be shared carefully due to specialist training being needed to interpret reports correctly. However, it remains an area of concern for the joint trade unions.
- A case-study on fire safety, developed by USHA, and available on the UCEA website. This focuses on good practice in relation to fire warden coverage on campuses, particularly in the context of increased homeworking.

6. Statistics on sickness absence in HE 2024-25

UCEA has conducted annual sickness absence surveys for HE since 2012. A summary of some of the headline results from the surveys for the academic years 2020-21 to 2024-25 is presented below. UCEA members can download the full reports of the UCEA Sickness Absence Surveys, from the UCEA website.

a) Overall sickness absence levels in HE

Table 1: Five-year comparison of overall sickness absence levels in HE

Absence measure	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023/24	2024/25
Mean number of days absence per employee per year	4.4	6.4	5.9	6.1	6.0
Percentage of working time lost per year to sickness absence	2.0%	2.9%	2.7%	2.8%	2.7%

The mean sickness absence rate of 6.0 days decreased slightly from 6.1 in the previous year (2023-24) and continues to show consistency with pre-pandemic levels. In comparison, in the five years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the average was 5.9 days. According to Brightmine, this reflects the trend in the wider economy where in 2025, there was an average of 5.7 days absence per employee (3.7% of working days lost), a decrease from 7.0 days in 2022.

b) Short-term sickness absence

Short-term absence (absences of up to 20 consecutive working days) decreased slightly from 2.8 days in 2023-24 to 2.7 days in 2024-25. Consistent with last year's report, colds (including confirmed and suspected Covid-19 cases), were the main reason for short-term absences. The three academic years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic had an average of 2.8 short-term absence days a year. After some volatility during and immediately after the pandemic, data now suggests stabilisation; the average for the last three years is 2.7 days.

c) Long-term sickness absence

Table 2: Five-year comparison of long-term sickness absence as a percentage of all sickness absence

Absence measure	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Percentage of sickness absence which is long-term (over 20 consecutive working days)	62.1%	53.4%	54.9%	54.0%	55.3%

Long-term sickness absence rates (over 20 consecutive working days) also continue to indicate a return to pre-pandemic rates. Long-term sickness absence as a percentage of all sickness absence (55.3%), is very similar to the percentage for the last two years and similar to 2017-19 levels (54.3% on average). HEIs have reported various measures to support employees with long-term sickness absence. These included long-term sickness absence meetings, increasing the use of occupational health services, and other wellbeing provisions such as Employee Assistance Programmes (96% of institutions that responded to UCEA's survey of benefits offer an EAP, see the UCEA Benefits of Working in HE 2023 survey report). UCEA has also published a series of case studies which highlight good practice from the sector in relation to mental health, and we welcome the addition of new case-studies from our members.

d) Reasons for sickness absence

Mental health (which for the purposes of the survey includes exhaustion, fatigue, nervous debility, alcohol/drug abuse) continues to be the most common cause of sickness absence, accounting for 29.1% of all absences in HE (short and long-term absence). This is a slight increase from last year, when mental health accounted for 28.0% of all absences. Although reporting on "work-related stress, depression and anxiety" as a category, and therefore not a direct comparison to UCEA's wider mental health category, the HSE has reported that in 2024/25, absences for these reasons accounted for 52% of all work-related ill health in Great Britain.

Mental health was the most reported reason for long-term sickness absence in 89.5% of HEIs. It was the second most common reason for short-term sickness amongst 55.3% of HEIs in 2024-25, compared with 58.3% of HEIs in 2023-24. Approximately half of the absence days under this category were listed as stress-related. The proportion of stress-related sickness absence that is work-related has increased slightly, from 34.3% to 34.8% over the past year. The UCEA absence survey confirmed that HEIs continue to refine their mental health support for their staff. As mentioned above, colds (including confirmed and suspected Covid-19 cases), were the main reason for short-term absences.

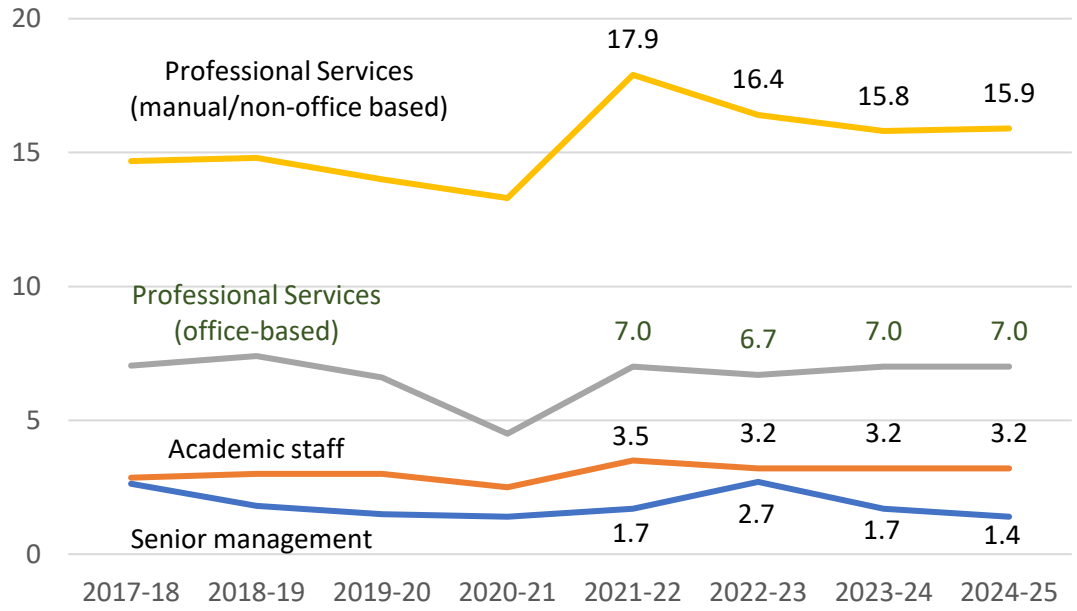
A potential concern arising from an increase in working from home is that this may lead to an increase in musculoskeletal problems. At the height of the pandemic, musculoskeletal problems represented 10.2% of absence days. However, interestingly, there has been a decrease to 8.3% of the days missed in 2024-25.

e) Sickness absence levels by category of staff

Sickness absence levels by staff group have remained consistent. HEIs have reported their professional services staff (manual/non-office based) as having more days of sick leave than other staff groups as in previous years – 15.9 days (see Figure 1 below). The second highest group is professional services staff (office based), with an average of 7 days of sickness absence. The senior manager staff group saw a decrease of sickness absence days from 1.7 days in the previous year to 1.4 days. The level for academic staff remained unchanged at 3.2 days.

47.8% of respondents indicated that underreporting of sickness absence by academic staff was a moderate or significant concern (a decrease from 51.4% in 2023-24), which is the highest level for all employee groups.

Figure 1: Average working days lost to sickness absence by employee group over time



UCEA's sickness absence surveys show that HEIs continue to support their staff with a wide range of wellbeing initiatives and measures, and generous employment benefits. UCEA provides support through a range of resources and the sharing of good practice aligned with our survey data, and feedback from our networks and committees. UCEA encourages our members to consider health and wellbeing as an integral aspect of the employee experience.

7. Staff reportable accidents and injuries - RIDDOR

Statistics on reportable accidents and injuries[1]

Summary

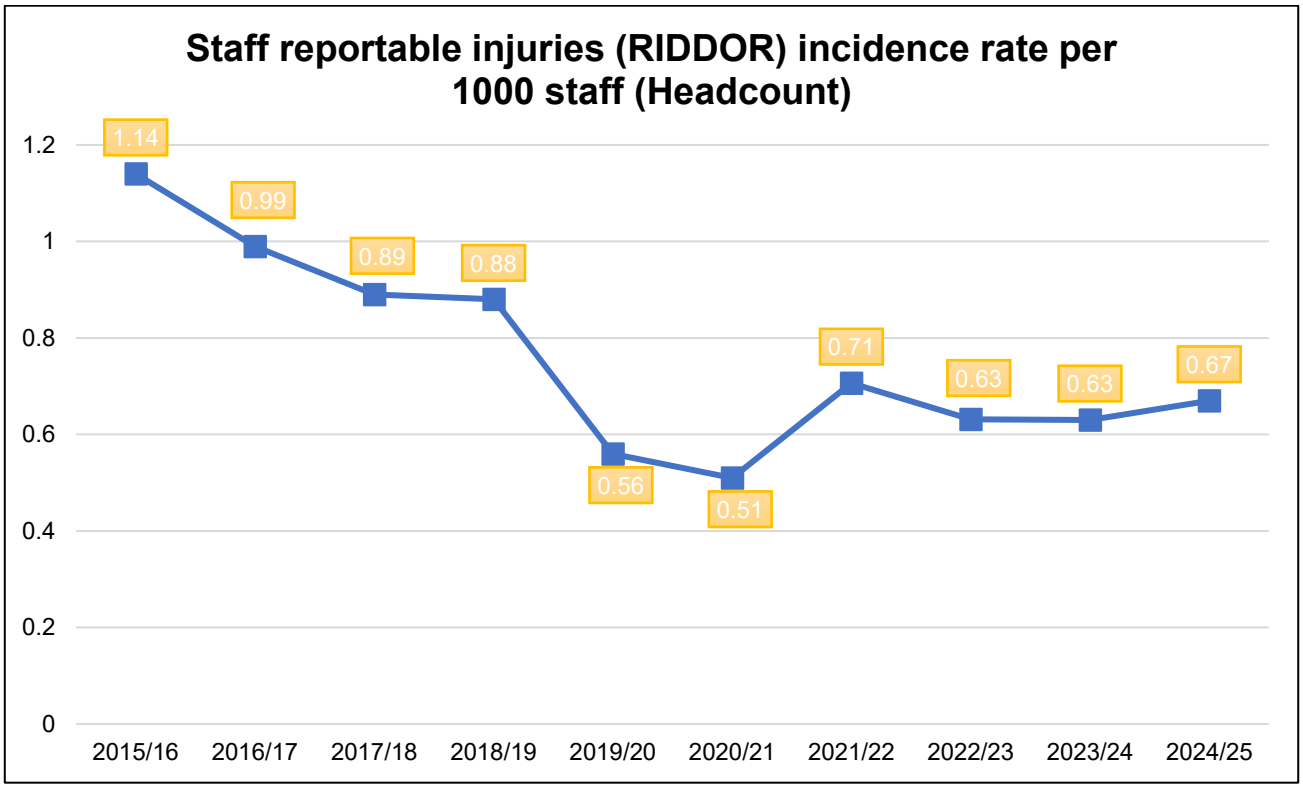
USHA Incident Data	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Number of staff RIDDOR reportable injuries	118	159	166	175	201
Number of student RIDDOR reportable injuries	36	60	65	66	43
Total of non-injury/near misses	2,090	3,294	5,377	5,623	6,213
Total number of occupational diseases reportable under RIDDOR	5	7	10	11	7
Number of staff fatalities	0	0	0	1	0
Number of student fatalities	0	0	1	0	1

The figures provided for 2024-25 are based on a sample of 74 responding HEIs.

[1] All information on RIDDOR has been provided by the Universities Safety and Health Association (USHA).

The graph below shows the reportable accident rate since 2015/16 for *employees* and highlights that RIDDOR injuries remain low and in line with recent years. The table below provides a comparison with pre-Covid-19 and Covid-19 rates.

Total staff reportable injuries – RIDDOR



The overall reportable accident rate in the HE sector reflects well when compared with the HSE figures of UK-wide accident reporting. For 2024/25, there were 2.09 RIDDOR-reported non-fatal injuries per 1000 employees, and 124 RIDDOR-reported fatal work-related accidents. The HSE has reported that the long-term trend continues downward for employer-reported non-fatal injuries. Trends in work-related ill health and workplace injury for Great Britain up to March 2025 can be found on the HSE website.

Appendix 1

Higher Education member associations represented on the UCEA Health and Safety Committee – see Appendix 2 below.

Acronym	Full name
AHUA	Association of Heads of University Administration
AMOSSHE	The Student Services Organisation (Formerly the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education)
AUDE	Association of University Directors of Estates
AURPO	Association of University Radiation Protection Officers
CUBO	Colleges and Universities Business Officers
HEOPS	Higher Education Occupational Physicians / Practitioners
HEBCON	Higher Education Business Continuity Network
UCEA	Universities and Colleges Employers Association
UHR	Universities Human Resources
USHA	Universities Safety and Health Association

Appendix 2

UCEA Health and Safety membership and terms of reference

Membership

The membership of the Committee during 2025 is presented below:

Role	Name
Chair	Mike Parker Chair of Board of Governors Liverpool John Moores University
UCEA representative	Roshan Israni Deputy Chief Executive
Advance HE representative	Tracey Connor Head of People
AHUA representative	Sophie Bowen Chief Student Officer University of East London
AMOSSHE representative	Dr Aleata Alstad-Calkins Director of Student Support & Success University of Roehampton Reserve: Dr Sarah F Sweeney Head of Student Support and Wellbeing Lancaster University
AUDE representatives	Stephen Wells Director of Estates and Facilities University of East Anglia Emma Shirbon Assistant Director - Compliance and Performance UCL

AURPO representative	Tim Coldwell Lead Health & Safety Advisor – Special Hazards University of Hull
CUBO representative	To August 2025: Jo Hardman Director of Estates, Facilities and Commercial Services University of Lancaster From September 2025: Melissa Browne Interim Director of Commercial Services and Estates University of Kent
GuildHE representative	To October 2025: Graham Curling HR Director Leeds Arts University
HEBCoN representative	Sarah Rowe Director of Business Resilience Kings College London
Higher Education Occupational Practitioners (HEOPS) representative	Max Hill Director of Occupational health and Wellbeing University College London
Pro Vice-Chancellor	Mark Sterling Pro Vice-Chancellor Manchester Metropolitan University
UHR representative	To: June 2025 Eilidh Fraser Director of HR and OD, Abertay University (UHR Treasurer) Sarah Setchell Director of HR, University of Derby From July 2025: Richard Brooks Director of Human Resources University of Bath Ian Wright Director of Human Resources The University of Sheffield
USHA representatives	Scott Trim Director of Health, Safety & Business Continuity Aston University (Chair of USHA to September 2025) Jane Ball Head of Health and Safety Open University (Chair of USHA from October 2025)

UCEA officers: Head of Employment Policy and Advice, and Secretary to the Committee Senior Employment Policy Adviser	 Simon Sumner Elaine Schegar

Terms of Reference

The Health and Safety Committee acts as a central point for discussion and resolution of health, safety and wellbeing matters within the HE sector.

In particular, the Committee is tasked with the following:

- To advise the UCEA Board and UCEA members on matters of health, safety and wellbeing.
- To represent HE institutions (HEIs) on matters of health and safety and be a mechanism for explaining the particular needs of the sector.
- To identify, generate and publish guidance for HEIs where appropriate.
- To provide a network for collective discussion and action on health and safety matters across the various associations within HE.
- To report to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and other government departments on sector progress on health and safety.
- To nominate representatives of HE employers to participate in forums, such as the Higher Education Safety and Health Forum (HESH) and to provide the brief and mandate for such fora.
- To identify a programme for UCEA's Health and Safety events.
- To produce responses on behalf of the sector to appropriate consultations on legislation and guidance.

Appendix 3

HESH Forum membership and terms of reference

Membership

The HESH Forum comprises representatives of UCEA, the HSE, USHA and the trade unions (UCU, UNISON and Unite). The 2025 membership of the Forum is set out below:

Role	Name
Chair	Mike Parker
HSE representatives	Barbara Hockey/Jenny Hagan
UCU representative	Alex Lancaster
USHA Chair	Scott Trim/Jane Ball (from October 2025)
UNISON representative	Fiona McDonald
Unite representative	Christopher Kennedy
UCEA representative	Roshan Israni
UCEA representative	Simon Sumner
UCEA representative	Elaine Schegar

Terms of Reference

To act as a forum for the Higher Education sector, developing the partnership between employers, employee representatives and the Health and Safety Executive, and providing strategic oversight and direction on matters of occupational health and safety. It is expected that the establishment of this Forum will lead to the evolution of practical solutions to occupational health and safety issues. The regulators will be invited to attend, and others may be co-opted.

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