UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES EMPLOYERS ASSOCIATION

Health, Safety and Wellbeing strategic framework - 2026-27

Employee experience – Support for healthy workplaces

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The context for UCEA's Health, safety and wellbeing strategic framework 2026-2027

UCEA's previous *HE sector Health, safety and wellbeing strategic framework 2022-25* was written at a time of uncertainty and significant change, when the pandemic was still impacting employers in the UK. As we look towards the immediate future, to 2027, it is clear that volatility continues to characterise higher education (HE) for sector-specific and economy-wide reasons. The implications for HE sector employers are complex and evolving.

The financial sustainability of the Higher Education sector has come under increasing pressure in recent years for a number of reasons including: high levels of variability in both UK and international student recruitment, a decline in the real-terms value of tuition fee income from UK undergraduates relative to costs, and inflationary and economic pressures on operating costs. This has led to many universities being forced to make difficult decisions in the short and medium term, such as introducing efficiency initiatives and organisational change programmes; whilst longer-term, systemic solutions are being considered.

The impact of this challenging context on the workforce has been acknowledged by several agencies within the HE sector. UCEA, uniquely placed as the leading voice on employment matters in the UK HE sector, has recognised the unprecedented challenges of recent years faced by employers in its Strategic Plan for 2024-2027[1]. This includes ***Supporting employer aspirations to enhance the employee experience (EX)*** as the first Strategic Priority. UCEA's EX work is being taken forward under a Five-Pillar programme of work. The first of these pillars - ***Supporting work with members to promote good employment practice in the areas of learning and development, safety at work and physical, mental health and wellbeing*** – recognises that good health, safety and wellbeing is the cornerstone of a positive employee experience. The success of all aspects of the employee journey depend on employees feeling physically, mentally and psychologically safe – employees need to feel supported by their employers in a healthy working environment to be productive, engaged and committed. A healthy workforce directly contributes to a positive learning environment and student experience, whilst indirectly shaping a good heath and safety culture that benefits the entire university community.

Despite this backdrop of financial challenges and inevitably limited resources, UCEA is aware of our members' prioritisation of the health, safety and wellbeing of their staff. This is evident from the feedback we regularly receive from our widespread networks, the joint work we engage in with sector partners, and the benchmarking surveys we undertake. Good employment practices and frameworks exist across the diverse HE sector; and employee benefits often well exceed the minimum legislative requirements - annual leave, family friendly policies, flexible working arrangements, sickness absence, pay allowances, and pensions schemes, in particular, compare favourably with other sectors. Similarly, our surveys indicate that HE sector sickness absence levels and pay gap reporting also compare favourably with the wider economy. Our work in the area of health, safety and wellbeing takes these positive factors into account and is led by the needs of our members, which we continually assess.

[1] *Facilitating transformational change, Enhancing the employee experience*

Meeting our members' needs

We are committed to supporting our members to achieve the highest standards in health, safety and wellbeing in their employment policies and practices by:

1. 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 issues which arise at the Committee are fed into our programme of work and services.

2. Facilitating the **Higher Education Safety and Health Forum (HESH)** which aims to develop partnership working between the employer and employee representatives, and to provide a strategic oversight on matters of workplace health and safety issues in the sector. Membership of HESH also includes representatives from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as the regulator, and the Universities Safety and Health Association (USHA), as experts in workplace health and safety. It is therefore an invaluable forum for partnership working, leading to joint guidance on a range of issues such as ventilation and guidance on working effectively with safety representatives.

3. Sharing information and good practice through **surveys, reports, case studies and infographics**. These enable member HEIs to benchmark key indicators of health, safety and wellbeing as well as related HE sector benefits (such as those related to sickness absence and 'family friendly' benefits). Our members are able to draw on these resources when designing and implementing wellbeing strategies and initiatives, as part of their Employee Value Proposition.

4. Keeping our members abreast of the latest developments in health, safety and wellbeing in the HE sector and the wider economy through relevant events such as our annual **Health, safety and wellbeing conference**. For example, our conference for the last two years has included sessions on neurodiversity in the workplace - an area of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion which has gained increased focus in recent years.

5. Representing the views of HE sector employers in relevant **government consultations** such as the consultation on strengthening Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), as part of the Westminster Government's commitments under the Employment Rights Bill; and consultations on parental leave and pay, and on introducing mandatory pay gap reporting on ethnicity and disability.

6. Progressing work on **pay gaps, contract types and workload**, which have potential health, safety and wellbeing implications and therefore a direct impact on the employee experience.

The themes

Over the next two years, we will respond to our members' needs by working primarily with the UCEA Health and Safety Committee, the HESH Forum and sector partners to focus on the following, interconnected, key themes.

Theme 1: Creating a safety culture

A positive safety culture ensures that health, safety and wellbeing are not viewed as compliance-driven obligations but aligned to organisational values and behaviours with the following key benefits:

- ✓ The prioritisation of health, safety and wellbeing, starting at the highest levels of the organisation, as a means of reducing risk
- ✓ Employee engagement and trust, and a culture of openness and shared responsibility
- ✓ Improvements in productivity and efficiency, organisational resilience, and future-readiness to tackle emerging risks such as psychosocial hazards and rapid technological change
- ✓ The strengthening of organisational reputation through the demonstration of social responsibility.

Our support under this theme will include:

- Promoting leadership commitment to health, safety and wellbeing
- Developing Health, safety and wellbeing strategies
- Partnership working with trade unions on health, safety and wellbeing matters
- Staff communications regarding health, safety and wellbeing
- Digital transformation and safety and wellbeing.

Theme 2: Organisational change

The delivery of UCEA's Strategic priority: *Supporting employers in their transformation and organisational change agendas, building flexibility into workforce models to meet their business needs* identifies that understanding and improving the end-to-end employee journey is key to successful change and transformation.

To achieve the best possible outcomes from planned organisational change, organisations must proactively support both managers who are delivering change as well as the affected staff. Change, when managed well, can improve the experience of staff, leading to happier and more productive employees, and agility to respond to changing pressures. Managed poorly, it can lead to poor morale, loss of output, and ultimately a decrease in the student experience.

Our support under this theme will include:

- Staff communications regarding organisational change
- Sharing good practice in organisational change policies and practices to enable benchmarking
- Wellbeing initiatives, including their evaluation in the context of limited resources and changing priorities.

Theme 3: Support for the inclusive workplace

Inclusivity transforms the employee experience from individuals "having a job" into being part of a supportive, fair, and engaging workplace where people can thrive, contribute, and grow. The benefits, both individual and organisational, are widely reported – retention of staff, enhancement of innovation and creativity, the promotion of fairness, the strengthening of reputation and of course, the reduction of risks associated with legislative compliance, to name a few.

Whilst inclusivity as an important concept in employment is well recognised within the sector, and much progress has been achieved in this area, we will consider emerging and topical issues within this broad theme. As with many areas of our work, we will focus on policy, good practice and the practical implementation of legislation.

Our support under this theme will include:

- Neurodiversity in the workplace
- Women's health issues including the menopause
- Promotion of initiatives to support men's mental and physical health including raising awareness of health issues, reducing barriers to seeking support and encouraging engagement with workplace initiatives
- The multigenerational workforce
- Workplace flexibility including remote/hybrid working.

Theme 4: Regulatory landscape

Staying proactive in understanding and implementing legislative changes will help institutions create safer, more compliant, and supportive workplaces. In the next two years, we will support our members in relation to key legislative reforms and compliance with current health and safety issues impacting HEIs. We will do this through responding to government consultations, sharing guidance and good practice, and promoting the work of sector partners.

Our support under this theme will include:

- The Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act (known as 'Martyn's Law').
- The Employment Rights Bill e.g. changes to SSP provisions and family-related policies.
- Occupational stress including organisational-level stress risk assessments
- Exposure to hazardous materials (e.g. asbestos and RAAC).

Monitoring progress

This framework will help guide the specific actions within these themes which are captured in our annual Action Plans. These Plans are developed in consultation with the Health and Safety Committee. Progress on delivery against these themes will be monitored on a bi-annual basis by the Health and Safety Committee, and outcomes will be reported in our Annual Health and Safety Report. To assist the Health and Safety Committee in ensuring the themes reflect the sector's needs, feedback and contributions from individual institutions will be considered throughout the period of UCEA's strategic plan.

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