The integration of health and safety in university curricula: the Australian experience

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1. Introduction

Universities have an important role in the development of health and safety skills, knowledge and attitudes. However, it is widely assumed that such information in university curricula is delivered and assessed on an ad-hoc basis which does not adequately prepare graduates for the workforce. In 2011 a pilot project was conducted at the University of Adelaide to address the integration of health and safety education in University curricula. The output was the OHS Curriculum Content Review Toolkit (CCRT), which was based on a conceptual framework encompassing:

- The intended curriculum
- The taught curriculum
- The received curriculum

The first two aspects were addressed in the pilot study. The objectives of this project were to:

- Validate the toolkit by conducting usability testing in three areas, namely Nursing, Engineering and Education, at all three major universities in South Australia
- Explore the views of final year undergraduate students with regard to the received curriculum
- Explore the views of academic coordinators and other relevant staff with regard to the toolkit and health and safety in the curriculum
- Elicit the view of professional organisations and accrediting bodies regarding health and safety in the curriculum.

The domains of Engineering and Nursing were selected as dichotomous examples of the future workforce – designers and “end-user” – both of whom are critical to improvements in the field of health, safety and injury prevention. The future ‘teachers’ workforce was selected for its facilitation of health and safety skills, knowledge and attitudes in young and/or new workers.

2. Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with final year students, university academics (who also completed the CCRT) and representatives of professional organisations. Altogether, 20 interviews and 1 focus group were conducted. These were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

3. Results

The completed CCRTs allowed academics to demonstrate the integration of existing health and safety content and to identify areas for future improvement.

In the thematic analysis of the interviews there were notable discrepancies in the views of the stakeholders on the adequacy of existing content in university curricula and the preparedness of graduates to enter the workforce - professional organizations (not prepared), academics (well-prepared) and students (variable depending on discipline).

4. Discussion

This study has demonstrated the usability of the CCRT in a variety of disciplines at a range of universities. While the views on the adequacy of existing health and safety content varied between stakeholders there was a consistent view, particularly among students, that discipline-specific and case-based learning, rather than generic health and safety-related information are required in university curricula.

Acknowledgements
We thank the participants and SafeWork South Australia for funding support, under the Commissioned Research Grants Scheme. SafeWork SA and the South Australian Government do not endorse the content of this material and the views expressed herein are not reflective of SafeWork SA or the South Australian Government.