

Media Release

Research to improve workplace health and safety in education sector

Stress and burnout were among some of the health and safety concerns raised by Australian Education Union members working in schools, TAFEs and other education services, in a report released today.

A survey of nearly 5000 members of the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union found that 51 per cent of their members had experienced an occupational health and safety incident in the previous year.

AEU (Vic) union members were asked to rate their workplaces on features that should keep people safe at work, such as access to occupational health and safety (OHS) training or OHS being a priority.

Stress-related matters were a focus of the survey. Respondents reported high levels of work overload and moderate levels of work-related burnout, with 55 per cent of all respondents reporting that they have experienced injuries or illnesses in the past year that was either work-related stress or another mental health issue.

Work pressure, workloads that increased or changed, and the demands of looking after students with personal difficulties were common causes of stress.

Lead researcher Professor Helen De Cieri, Monash Business School, said the report highlighted that in workplaces with greater commitment to health, wellbeing and safety, individuals experience fewer injuries and illness at work.

“Essentially we want to shift the focus of workplaces from counting the cost of injuries and illness to better work practices that prevent incidents, with more attention to OHS leadership, equipment and resources, and access to health and safety training,” Professor De Cieri said.

“We’ve developed and piloted a practical survey tool that employers can now use to help them identify areas for health and safety improvement, people who are more at risk in the workplace, and steps to prevent incidents from occurring.

“It’s also important to highlight that it’s not just about physical injuries and illness, but also mental health issues and wellbeing in the workplace.”

The survey is part of a larger research project looking at workplace health and safety perceptions and performance across various industries.

The research team piloted the Organizational Performance Metric (OPM) to assess employees’ views of how healthy and safe their workplaces are.

The OPM is an eight-item measure of OHS leading indicators.

The survey targeted all registered members of the AEU in Victoria. Most respondents worked in primary or secondary schools; but there were also representatives from special schools, early childhood education, TAFE, Disability Services Centres and Adult Migrant Education Services.

People in primary and special schools rated their workplaces highest, and TAFE workers rated their workplaces the lowest. Reporting their experience of work-related injury or illness, those in Disability Services Centres said they were involved in more incidents, on average, than other groups.

The project was conducted by Monash University in partnership with WorkSafe Victoria, the Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research (ISCRR), and SafeWork Australia. ISCRR is a research partnership between the Transport Accident Commission (TAC), WorkSafe Victoria and Monash University.

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