

THE REGULATORY OBLIGATION TO MANAGE AND CONTROL PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS AND RISK FOR STAFF RESPONDING TO STUDENTS DISCLOSING WELLBEING CONCERNS OR PRESENTING IN DISTRESS.

EDUCATION SECTOR



Accidental
Counsellor®

Work/Occupational Health and Safety Regulations have recently been (or will imminently be) amended across the States and Territories of Australia to include specific requirements around managing psychosocial hazards and risk in all workplaces, including in the Tertiary Education sector. The University is now required, amongst other things, to:

- Understand what is meant by a Psychosocial Hazard
- Understand what is meant by a Psychosocial Risk
- Manage those risks, and
- Implement control measures.

The purpose of control measures is to either eliminate, or at least minimise, psychosocial hazards and risks when avoidance of the hazard is not possible due to the nature of the employee's role.

The Amendments refer to a number of relevant factors to consider when determining the control measures that need to be put into place, including:

- Duration, frequency and severity of exposure to the hazard
- The manner in which hazards may interact or combine
- The design and systems of work, and
- **The information, training and instruction given to employees.**

Those working in people-facing roles are frequently exposed to psychosocial hazards. Many of these hazards will interact, however their impact can be substantially reduced with the correct training, systems of work, approach, frameworks, policies and processes in place.

It is well recognised that those who work with students in any capacity, particularly given the ongoing impacts of Covid-19, spiralling cost of living, natural disasters and stress associated with study, are frequently engaging with, and exposed to the psychosocial hazard of, students who are in vulnerable

circumstances, angry, distressed, overwhelmed or in crisis. The associated psychosocial risks of compassion fatigue, secondary or vicarious trauma and burnout are health and safety issues about which the University needs to be aware and has an obligation to manage and control.

Combining her experiences as a solicitor and also volunteer crisis supporter on Lifeline's **13 11 14** suicide prevention and crisis intervention line, Cutty Felton of Accidental Counsellor Pty Ltd developed her unique and well-known approach and frameworks which are well placed to meet the obligations of Universities to manage and control some of the most common psychosocial risks being experienced by their employees, particularly given their exposure to those students who are agitated, aggressive, struggling or at risk. With extensive experience training frontline and other staff across many different Universities around Australia, Cutty has unique insight and understanding of many of the common situations and issues encountered by staff with students in that sector.

Core to her ethical and empathic approach is an understanding of the necessity for, and impact of, maintaining Boundaries. At all times, and especially in the face of potential psychosocial hazard, it is imperative that the three critical boundaries (of the role, of the conversation with the student and as provided by policy & procedure) are maintained, ensuring that safety of both the student and the employee are the overriding priority.

For those psychosocial hazards that cannot be eliminated, skills to reduce their impact on the employee and information about positive self-care and as to how and from whom to obtain support when needed, are an important aspect of her program.

Robust examination of expectations placed on employees, as well as organisational policies and processes and whether they enhance the safety of (or inadvertently increase the risk to) the team member, are an additional crucial aspect to be considered.

Cutty welcomes the Work/ Occupational Health and Safety Amendments, recognising as they do that psychosocial hazards and risks are WHS/OHS issues to be managed and controlled, rather than simply 'wellbeing' or 'resilience' matters which are often considered to be the ultimate responsibility of the employee, a major barrier to their seeking support when exposed to psychosocial hazard and risk in the workplace.

