

## Memo

To Safety Co-ordinators (for onward transmission to all Heads of Schools, with copies to Deans of Faculties)

From Dr Melanie Taylor, University Safety Advisor

Date 31<sup>st</sup> May 2005

Reference Safety Circular 10/2005

### Health & safety – the duty to supervise

1. The Health & Safety at Work etc Act 1974 requires employers to provide “**information, instruction, supervision and training**” [section 2(2)(c) strictly applies to employees, but section 2(3) extends a general duty to others such as students]. These 4 categories are separate and distinct duties, and this particular circular is concerned with supervision only.
2. Many of you will already have in place tried and tested levels of supervision, particularly for undergraduate students in taught classes. A recent accident at the University, in which 2 post-graduate students were injured, has drawn attention to the need to supervise any person in proportion to their individual experiences and abilities, rather than by a general rule of thumb. One of the outcomes of any risk assessment process should be a specified level of supervision for those creating or working with the hazards, and those exposed to the risks.
3. In the recent accident, post-graduates from overseas were working in a laboratory setting. The group was supervised through regular visits and discussions, but the level of supervision was not sufficient to identify that a first year post-graduate student had started working that day with incompatible chemicals, and that the COSHH assessment had failed to identify the potential explosion risk from mixing these in the experiment and in the waste stream. The Health and Safety Executive’s letter on this subject points out that additional supervision in the first few months of a post-graduate project may be required.
4. Many considerations need to be taken into account when deciding how to supervise staff or students, and there are many variations on how much supervision must be provided and how that can be achieved. Basically, the manager / principal investigator must assess an individual’s competency to work and make appropriate assessments of the risks involved. The factors to be taken into account include, but are not necessarily restricted to, the following:

- known experience of working on the specific tasks (eg by personal observation of performance during an undergraduate course)
  - implied experience of working on the specific tasks (eg by qualifications gained elsewhere, or from references)
  - known or implied knowledge of the topic
  - training courses attended
  - training provided in the work setting during which observations of competency can be made
  - understanding of the risk assessment process (eg during general or group discussions)
  - use of literature searches to inform risk assessments
  - accident or near miss records
  - language and comprehension skills (eg new overseas students may not grasp the nuances of the UK legal requirements)
  - number of times the person refers to another authority for assistance
  - quality of end product
  - general indicators of good (laboratory) practice eg tidy work area, clear labelling of made-up samples or specimens, up-to-date scripts and laboratory notebooks, etc
5. It is likely that students and staff from overseas will need additional supervision early on in their work to ensure that they are fully aware of the University's legal obligations and systems of safe working. The level of supervision should reduce as their competence increases.
  6. The risk assessment should record the level of supervision decided upon. For example, it might say for a new post-graduate that all changes in experimental protocols must be signed off by the supervisor. For a more experienced and competent post-graduate, it might say that work over a given range of experimental variables can proceed on the basis of assessments made by the student, and only certain changes need to be signed off by the supervisor.
  7. The Staff Training and Development Unit provides many relevant courses for staff carrying out risk assessments of all kinds. Further advice on levels of supervision is available from Health & Safety Services (contact your Faculty Safety Co-ordinator).

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