University of Aberdeen

POLICY ON THE MANAGEMENT OF WORK RELATED STRESS

Introduction

The University of Aberdeen is committed to providing a healthy and safe working environment for all staff and we recognise that excessive levels of work-related stress are a potential cause of ill-health.

We also recognise that we have a duty in law to ensure that the health of our employees is not adversely affected by their work. This Policy provides guidance on how issues relating to work-related stress will be managed within the University.

Policy Statement

It is the policy of the University of Aberdeen to take all reasonable and practicable steps to safeguard the health and safety of our employees while at work. We recognise that excessive levels of stress, especially if, endured for long periods can lead to ill health. Harmful levels of stress can arise as a result of factors both in the workplace and from employees’ personal and family lives. Whilst we recognise that we have no control over external factors, our objectives as an employer committed to effectively managing stress at work are to:

- Identify sources of harmful levels of stress and prevent, as far as is reasonable and practicable, employees being exposed to harmful levels of stress at work;
- Enable managers, supervisors and individual employees to recognise, at an early stage, problems which might be related to harmful levels of stress;
- Provide support for those who are suffering ill health due to work related stress and provide assistance to enable employees to recover their full potential as soon as possible.

We recognise that a policy on work related stress cannot sit in isolation. It must be underpinned by other policies which address matters which might result in harmful levels of stress being experienced by employees.

What is stress?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". However, if stress becomes too excessive and prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop.

Work is generally considered to be a positive factor in life, but it can also be a great source of pressure. There is a difference between pressure and stress. Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor, and is often essential in a job. It can help us achieve our goals and perform better. Stress occurs when this pressure becomes excessive as it is a natural reaction to too much pressure. External factors, for example difficulties in an employee’s personal life, can also make it difficult for an individual to cope with the demands of their job.

Symptoms of stress may be physical, for example:

- altered appetite
- changes in weight
- headache

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• backache
• skin rashes
• general tiredness
• difficulty in sleeping

Stress may also manifest itself in:

• anxiety
• depression
• indecision
• uncharacteristic irritability or impatience
• an inability to concentrate or remember

HSE Management Standards

The HSE has developed six Management Standards to help assess and tackle the main causes of stress. The standards focus on six aspects of work as follows:

1. Demands – Includes issues like workload, work pattern and the work environment.
2. Control – How much say the person has in the way they do their work.
3. Support – Includes the encouragement and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
4. Relationships – Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
5. Role – Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles.
6. Change – How organisation change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

We commit to using the HSE Management Standards within the University to help identify sources of harmful levels of stress at work with a view to minimising the likelihood of stress (through risk assessments) and dealing with individual cases which arise. For more information on the HSE’s Management Standards go to: www.hse.gov.uk/stress

What to do if you feel you are suffering from stress

If you feel that you may be suffering from stress, there are a number of individuals within the University who may be able to provide you with support and/or advice. In the first instance, you should contact either:

• Head of School/Section
• Human Resources Officer
• Harassment Adviser
• Occupational Health Service
• GP
• Counselling Service
• Trade Union Representative

If you have identified your concerns to your Head of School/Section/Supervisor, s/he will hold an informal meeting with you as quickly as practicable to try to identify what is causing your stress. You may also wish to raise your concerns with your Human Resources Adviser.

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Work-related stress

If it is clear that the cause of your stress is work related, your Head of School/Section/Supervisor will discuss with you ways in which the cause of your stress may be reduced e.g. investigating your workload, identifying specific problems you are experiencing within the workplace, concerns about bullying or harassment etc. S/he may also provide you with information about other members of staff within the University or other organisations who could assist you.

Non work-related stress

Even if the source of your stress lies outside work, we recognise that this may still have an impact upon you whilst undertaking your job. In such circumstances, you may wish to seek advice from the Occupational Health Service or the Counselling Service. We recognise that it may be difficult for you to talk to your Head of School/Section/Supervisor about problems outside work or of a personal nature, but would encourage you to make them aware of your situation to enable them to provide you with appropriate support in the workplace.

Risk assessments

Stress Risk Assessments will be carried out as part of the ongoing programme of staff surveys and Healthy Working Lives surveys. Statistical data from Occupational Health and sickness absence trends may also form part of the risk assessment process. Information gathered in these ways will be used to identify areas for improvement and action plans will be implemented by stakeholders and representative groups. No individual case data will be identifiable in this process.

Confidentiality

Complete confidentiality must be maintained at all times.

Training and development

An awareness of the symptoms of stress and learning how to recognise and reduce individual stress levels will be incorporated into staff training where appropriate. Training will also be provided for supervisors, focusing on minimising the likelihood of stress (using the HSE’s Management Standards) and providing advice on dealing with individual stress cases.

If you feel you would like personal development in this area, you should contact your line manager or any of the Human Resources or Staff Development Advisers.