

The Future of Health & Safety Education

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the number and range of tertiary health and safety courses on offer to occupational health and safety (OHS) professionals has dramatically increased. Consequently, today's OHS professional may follow an educational pathway that could commence at the Certificate 3 level in the TAFE sector and conclude with a PhD in the higher education sector.

The basic premise of this paper is that OHS professionals have the knowledge (gained through education) to improve OHS, but not necessarily the power. Conversely, managers have the power to improve OHS, but not necessarily the knowledge. Traditionally, OHS professionals have attempted to use their knowledge to influence managers to improve OHS. However, there is great potential for OHS improvements to fall through this knowledge-power gap (see figure 1).

The identification of this 'gap' may have implications for the future of OHS education. This paper will propose two OHS education pathways aimed at closing the 'gap'.

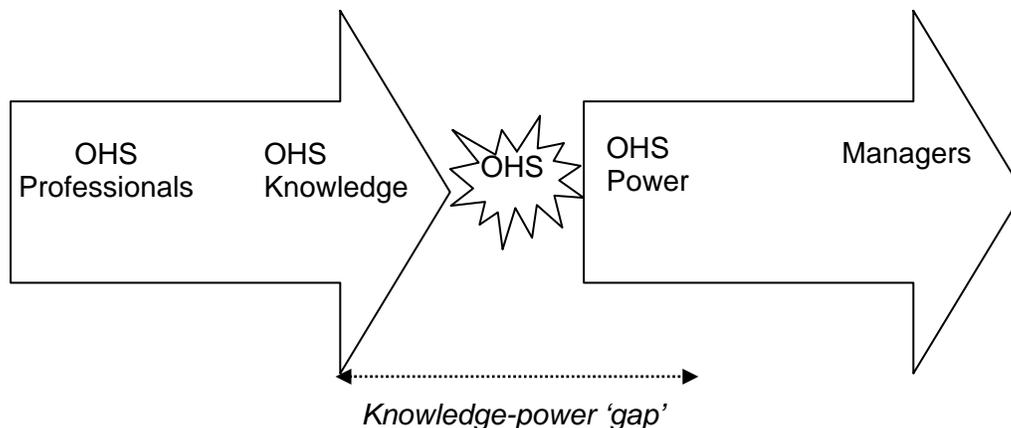


Figure1 Relationship dynamics and OHS improvement

An Overview of OHS Education in Australia

In January 1979, the Ballarat College of Advanced Education (now the University of Ballarat) pioneered the first tertiary level course in OHS aimed at the OHS specialist - the Graduate Diploma in Occupational Hazard Management (Wigglesworth 1978). The course was developed in response to an identified need for the formal education of

safety specialists who in turn, would prevent trauma in the workplace (Wigglesworth 1978). The objectives of safety education at that time was to:

... put the specialist into a position where he or she possesses sufficient knowledge of a broad field of technology to be able to specify solutions to a wide variety of problems (Wigglesworth 1978, p.27).

Subsequently, the number of tertiary level OHS courses increased rapidly during the 1980's and by 1995 it was estimated that approximately 50 tertiary level courses in OHS operated throughout Australia, producing between 500 – 1000 new graduates each year (Industry Commission 1995).

Today the Australian Qualifications Advisory Board (1996) through the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) determines the level of qualification that institutions in the different sectors can award. The pathways between the sectors are shown in figure 2.

(For figure, contact author)

Figure 2 Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

From humble beginnings in 1979, OHS education is now available from Certificate through to Doctorate level within the AQF.

It seems appropriate that 21 years on the University of Ballarat, as a pioneer of OHS education in Australia, should once again consider the future of OHS education. In the 1970's, the argument for a tertiary level course for OHS specialists was built around a problem; the unacceptable social, humanitarian and economic consequences associated with work-related injury and illness in Australia. In the year 2000 the problem is the same and the solution appears the same. It begs the question, 'has the increased number of better educated OHS specialists resulted in reductions in workplace injuries and illnesses?'

If the problem remains the same then perhaps the solution requires reframing. The progress made over the past 21 years needs to be critically evaluated, questions need to be asked and creative pathways into the future found. In considering the future of OHS education, two pathways will be explored, both of which exist against, and need to respond to, a backdrop of rapid change within tertiary education and industry generally.

Pathway One: Conservative - Educating OHS Professionals

The conservative pathway builds upon the past by continuing to educate and develop OHS professionals capable of influencing managers to improve OHS.

Educational institutions will continue to offer generalist and specialist education in health and safety, with course content tailored to best meet the needs of industry and to increase the ability of OHS professionals to influence managers.

Competition will be keen for student places. Students will enjoy greater flexibility in what they study, where and when (Fender 1999). Information technology and, in particular, the development of on-line courses, will support flexible options for students. One of the challenges will be to meet both industry and student needs at the right price. However, perhaps the greatest challenge will be to maintain educational rigour in the new fast-track learning environment.

The success of the conservative pathway should be measured by a noticeable reduction in both the human and financial costs associated with occupational injury and illness in Australian workplaces. That is, increasing educational levels amongst health and safety professionals will enable them to add value to industry through the better management of hazards and the associated risks.

This pathway raises an important question: *is management the job of the occupational health and safety professional?* (Hale 1995). Returning to the premise upon which this discussion is based, it is argued that it is difficult to manage without power, regardless of knowledge. Although it could be argued that knowledge is a source of power, Hale (1995) argues that the personal power relationship between OHS professionals and managers dictates influence and control. Hale (1995) draws upon Harris' (1970) metaphor of the *parent, adult and child* aspects of personality, and how these result in typical behaviours. Hale identifies three types of relationships between OHS professionals and managers (in relation to managing OHS in the workplace). They are:

- Expert (manager as parent/OHS professional as child)
- Coordinator (both as adults)
- Controller (OHS professional as parent/manager as child)

Hale (1995) further argues that OHS professionals are often given the role of controller because managers are unlikely to carry out OHS control tasks effectively on their own initiative. This type of relationship ... *lies deep at the roots of the appointment of OHS professionals ...* (Hale 1995, p.238).

In this relationship, with the OHS professional as parent and the manager as child, it is easy for *Gotcha* and *Catch me if you can* approaches to OHS management to prevail (Hale 1995). In this situation, power relationships become the focus of attention and not OHS improvement. OHS continues to fall through the knowledge-power 'gap'.

Pathway Two: Radical - Educating the Power Brokers

The discussion thus far has identified that OHS power and knowledge reside with different players within the workplace. Further, personal power relations between the players, OHS professionals and managers, will influence OHS outcomes. Pathway one argues that continuing to educate OHS professionals enables them to better influence the power brokers (managers).

The exploration of the second pathway begins by asking *is occupational health and safety the job of the manager?* (Hale 1995). It is argued that yes it is. In the workplace there are two groups who have been given the legitimate power of the law to bring about improvements in OHS and OHS specialists don't belong to either group. Health and safety professionals typically have no legislative power compared with health and safety

representatives and employers. OHS professionals typically lack positional power within organisations and may be embroiled in power struggles with managers as previously discussed.

If managers are expected by law to manage OHS, have the power to manage and improve OHS, but lack the requisite knowledge and/or are involved in playing power games with the OHS professionals that they employ, then it is argued that it may be better to educate the power brokers – the managers. On this basis, pathway two reframes who should receive OHS education.

This radical second pathway emerges even more clearly if the answer to two key questions is 'no'. The first question is 'has an increase in education levels among health and safety professionals impacted upon the human and financial costs associated with workplace injury and illness?' Although the answer to the first question is probably 'yes' in a number of specific workplaces, the answer overall is probably 'no' or at best, 'we don't know'. Assuming that the answer is 'no', then the second question is 'are we educating the right people?' It could be argued that the answer to this second question is also 'no'.

The development of this line of thinking raises further key questions. For example, 'do health and safety professionals have a role at all?' If the answer to this question is 'yes', then 'what will that role be in the future given that they have limited power?' Do we need more OHS managers or more managers who can manage OHS?

The radical future picture of OHS education would see managers undertaking short courses in OHS as part of professional development - say at the Graduate Certificate level (one-year part time) within the AQF framework. This is distinct from attempts to integrate OHS into undergraduate curriculum – attempts that have met with mixed success. This approach would then merge knowledge and power and place Australia firmly in a position to close the OHS improvement 'gap'.

What role then is left for the OHS professional? Is it possible for managers to develop sufficient depth of OHS knowledge to bring about the suggested improvements? In response to the former question the NOHSC (1999, p.42) issues paper on the future professional development needs of OHS generalists questions *whether or not the subject area of OHS is too narrow to sustain itself as a professional discipline within organisations long term*. In response to the latter, although managers can learn the knowledge and skills necessary to systematically manage and improve OHS within organisations, it is unlikely that they will have the time or interest in developing the deeper understanding of the processes that lead to injury and illness and their control. This must remain and be the defining characteristic of the OHS profession and OHS professional.

Perhaps the OHS professional of the future will work from outside organisations as consultants and knowledge generators. Rapidly transferring knowledge into workplaces, assisting managers to manage OHS by answering questions like 'what approaches to managing OHS work where, when and why?' and providing technical solutions to complex problems, is a conceivable picture of the future role of an OHS specialist. This approach would have the additional benefit of moving the power relationship onto an adult-adult footing.

Would this mean fewer OHS professionals? Maybe it would; maybe it raises the knowledge expectation bar. Perhaps a Masters degree would become the currency of OHS professionals of the future. Figure 3 illustrates the synthesis of these ideas.

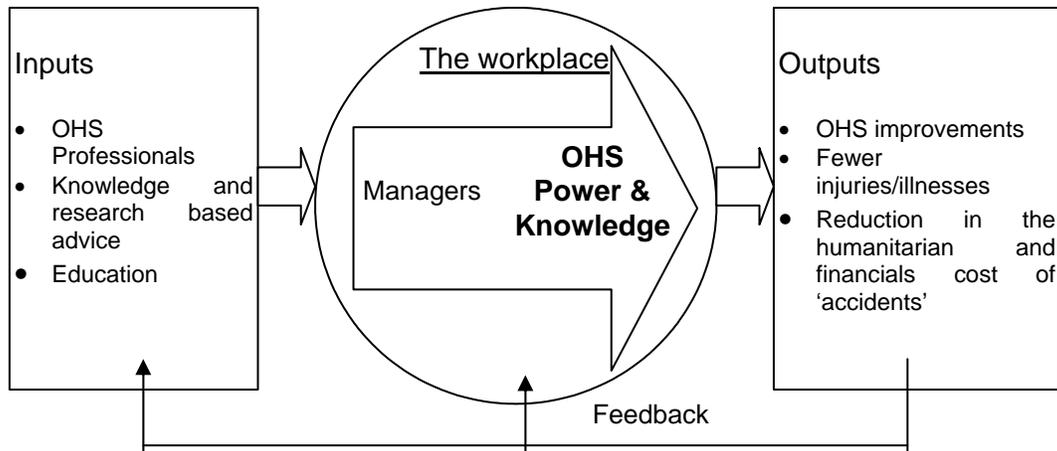


Figure 3 Re-balancing the relationship dynamics

Conclusion

The future of OHS education may need reframing to ensure the best solutions to OHS problems in Australia are found. The recipients of OHS education, regardless of who they are, must make a difference in the workplace. They must achieve OHS risk improvements that ultimately benefit business and the whole of society alike. This must be the measure of success. In part at least, the future of OHS education may be to give the power brokers (managers) more knowledge (through formal OHS education) and to increase the educational expectations placed upon OHS professionals.

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