Health and safety in a changing world

IOSH Research Programme – second call for proposals

IOSH is the Chartered body for health and safety professionals. With more than 40,000 members, it is the largest professional health and safety organisation in the world. IOSH was founded in 1945 and was granted a Royal Charter in 2002. Three years later it began to award Chartered Safety and Health Practitioner status to recognise individual professionalism and a commitment to ongoing learning and development. IOSH is a registered charity with the aim of improving health and safety at work, and supporting the health and safety professionals who are dedicated to reducing accidents and ill health.

Background
As a leading international health and safety body, IOSH is working to:
- make sure that people are at the heart of safety and health
- be the definitive voice for health and safety at work
- advance high professional standards
- champion pragmatic risk management, based on professional advice
- sponsor research and share knowledge
- support its members as leaders in safety and health in their communities and workplaces
- promote the benefits of good workplace health and safety.

To support these objectives, IOSH set a research budget in 2004, with a first round of projects commissioned in 2005. A strategic review in 2008 led to a decision to use some of these resources to fund a more integrated research programme promoting a closer relationship between researchers and other stakeholders and enhancing the work’s impact.

The parameters of IOSH’s research programme were established in 2008 and reflected in its First Call (December 2010) against the backdrop of the Young Report. This Second Call takes account of further public and policy debate, particularly with the publication of the Löfstedt Report (November 2011). It addresses some elements of the original vision that were not taken up by the projects funded under the First Call and introduces modifications.

Programme vision and objectives
The programme aims to inform strategic thinking and policy development and, specifically, to reinforce IOSH’s position as a ‘thought leader’ within the wider occupational safety and health (OSH) community. It has been designed to investigate the consequences of the changing landscape of OSH, increased decentralisation and networking in the delivery of products and services, the development of a level of a culture of resistance to perceived over-regulation, and the promotion of a risk-based approach to workplace health and safety.

New approaches to OSH practice are required, reflecting the evolution of more networked forms of organisation, the greater professionalism required to operate knowledge-based rather than rule-based assessments and interventions, and the need to secure public legitimacy for OSH.

The programme’s original objective was to investigate ‘the development of optimal ways to formulate valid efficient and effective interventions and their underlying determinants, including approaches to evaluating the validity of the information about risk on which the intervention is based, to improve OSH.’ This has led to a strategic focus on fundamental questions about knowledge and its management, particularly in the context of furthering understandings of risk and hazard, rather than on the development or evaluation of specific interventions. Such proposals may be submitted to IOSH’s other research funding route, the ‘annual competition’.

First Call: Current projects
The First Call selected three projects for funding:

OSH knowledge and its management (awarded to the Institute of Occupational Medicine – IOM). This project has two elements: a review of existing knowledge relevant to OSH interventions; and the current use of knowledge in OSH practice and scope for improvement. This project is informed by thinking in knowledge management and technology transfer. It will not produce a comprehensive review of every piece of research relevant to OSH but map the research and explore its coherence and accessibility to practitioners. It will highlight particular gaps in knowledge or in the integration of evidence. In the second phase, the project will examine who accesses this knowledge and how it is used in selected workplaces, representing different types of organisation in various industrial sectors.

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Achieving the right balance in policy and practice
(University of Nottingham). This focusses on the governance of OSH interventions, particularly the governmental and non-governmental requirements on organisations to implement specific policies, procedures or practices. It recognises that in addition to the ‘hard law’ of statutory rule-making there is a growing body of ‘soft law’, e.g. in codes, guidelines and statements of ‘good/best practice’, which may not have immediate legal force but which may be cited in litigation as evidence of the nature of the OSH environment in workplaces. A reduction in one type of requirement may simply mean an expansion in the other without actually enhancing the space for developing creative and locally-responsive solutions to OSH problems.

The management of OSH in networked systems of production or service delivery (Loughborough University).
This project investigates the challenges to OSH professionals trying to produce, collate and deploy knowledge across associations of networked organisations. It complements the work carried out by IOM looking at stocks and flows of knowledge within a limited number of industrial sectors – healthcare, construction and logistics. The networks mostly consist of larger organisations, although there is some involvement of SMEs.

Second Call: Proposals invited
This Second Call invites proposals in three areas which have been identified following consultations within IOSH and with the wider OSH research, practitioner and policy community. Research groups may submit more than one proposal but all proposals must clearly indicate their target area. Proposals which do not specify a target area listed in the Call will not be considered.

To complete the programme within the allocated time, new projects should plan to start by 01 February 2013 and finish by 28 February 2015. All Second Call projects should be capable of completion within 24 months.

Proposals are invited for projects on the topics outlined below.

Leadership and safety
There has been a movement away from traditional hierarchical bureaucracies as a mode of corporate organisation and towards risk-based modes of regulation. The changing nature of leadership in organisations presents new challenges for OSH practitioners in integrating health and safety with other aspects of line management. OSH practice may follow the model of other professions, abandoning an ‘enforcement-oriented’ approach of identifying relevant regulations and defining compliance, and instead advising business on how to achieve outcomes by applying expert knowledge. First Call projects were funded to describe such OSH knowledge and to examine how it might be accessed and used. This knowledge must be translated into action in ways that engage both line managers and workers, whether directly employed or as contractors or agency staff.

Proposals are invited that examine how OSH practitioners act as leaders on health and safety issues within contemporary UK organisations. They should describe how diverse forms of leadership – charismatic, transformational and distributed – are evolving, possibly through the use of case studies. Questions that might be addressed include: Where does the health and safety agenda fit within these leadership approaches? Under what conditions can OSH practitioners act as effective advocates, persuading both managers and workforces of the value of their knowledge and expertise? Can they act as ‘boundary-spanners’ to accelerate organisational learning from a generic pool of OSH knowledge? How can they ensure that OSH knowledge and experience are preserved in organisational memory so that avoidable errors are not repeated, especially in the less stable work environments of today?

Proposers may wish to consider whether OSH can emulate the way in which quality attainment has become an integral and continuous part of the business process rather than something achieved by periodic specialist interventions. What would be the implications for OSH practitioners? The maximum time available for this project is 24 months and proposals are invited with an indicative budget of £200,000-£225,000.

SMEs and access to OSH expertise
Particular concern has been expressed about the relationship between SMEs (including micro-businesses) and OSH requirements. SMEs are a growing part of the UK economy and there is an urgent need to improve our understanding of their engagement with OSH.

Proposals should capture the diversity of the sector. Some SMEs may possess a high degree of internal expertise and be well-placed to assess their own risks. However, limitations of scale and resources may make it difficult for them to consider and transfer all aspects of OSH that affect their business. Instead, they may become dependent on external sources of information and guidance. This may lead to costly over-compliance, as consultants seek to protect themselves from liability. Some SMEs may benefit from serving as sub-contractors to larger organisations, which may share knowledge as part of their corporate responsibility or reputation management. However, perhaps some of the problems reported by this sector reflect cultural, rather than structural, barriers and a wider hostility to intervention in what are perceived as personal and private concerns of owner-managers and their relationship to their staff. If so, regulatory reform may never resolve the complaints heard from this sector.

Proposals are invited for a project to investigate the perceptions of OSH issues among SMEs, including micro-businesses, to define their present sources of guidance, to examine the relationship between those sources and the knowledge base being defined by the IOM project, and to consider other barriers to access that may derive from the values and attitudes of owner-managers. The maximum time available for this project is 24 months and proposals are invited with an indicative budget of £200,000-£225,000.
The changing legitimacy of health and safety at work

Scholars have developed the concept of the ‘social licence to operate’ – the idea that corporations depend for their success on their ability to satisfy the public of their good citizenship rather than on their minimal compliance with statutory requirements. Arguably, this may also be true of professional groups like OSH practitioners. One way of considering the current challenges to health and safety practice is to suggest that its social licence has been compromised by a popularist perception of its over-zealousness and lack of common sense.

It has been different in the past. The Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act 1963 symbolised the extension of protection from manufacturing into the service sector. Agencies and legislation were consolidated by the landmark Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. How have public and political perceptions come to change so radically in the last 50 years?

Proposals are invited for a project to examine public and political attitudes to health and safety at work from 1960 to the present. This should go beyond a simple narrative history to explore possible social, economic, technological and other factors that may have driven the process. The project will probably involve extensive work on media archives, examining changes in coverage, parliamentary records, the language in which issues are debated, and evidence from social attitudes studies. Proposers may suggest oral history interviews or focus groups with key stakeholders from the earlier part of the period. If included, the proposal should specify how these would be archived for future research use.

Specific data on public values and attitudes to health and safety at work may be limited and proposers may find it useful to look more generally at evidence of possible changes in the public understanding and acceptance of risk over this period. This may involve reference to debates about the supposed emergence of a ‘risk society’, although proposers may wish to reflect on the disputed empirical foundations of the claims made by many writers on this theme. Has the social licence to operate been compromised more by changes in the social environment than in the legal framework and operating practices of those involved?

Proposals should also consider what implications might be derived from their account for future developments in OSH policy over the next five to ten years, taking account of known trends or plausible extrapolations from the present. This is an ambitious brief for the time and resources available and proposals will not be disadvantaged if they can set out a plausible sampling strategy, possibly focussing on critical points or case studies, although these should be set within a synoptic view of the whole period. The maximum time available for this project is 24 months and proposals are invited with an indicative budget of £150,000-£200,000.

Outcomes and deliverables

Projects will be expected both to achieve agreed outcomes and deliverables in their own right and to contribute to the overall programme’s outcomes and deliverables. Proposals should refer to the following expected deliverables, together with any others that applicants may wish to propose in order to enhance the impact of their work:

- an end-of-project report in a format suitable for publication by IOSH
- peer-reviewed papers in academic journals
- participation in dissemination events organised by IOSH, such as workshops, conferences or policy briefings for key stakeholders
- co-operation with IOSH press and media activities to promote awareness of the programme and its contributions
- presentations on the project at academic and professional meetings relevant to the applicant – funding can be included in the bid for some of these
- a contribution to an edited programme book, if one is contracted with a publisher.

Application process

We encourage participation in the programme from a wide range of academic backgrounds. Previous work in this specific area is not a prerequisite, although all bidders will be expected to demonstrate their record and to show how their experience will bring innovative perspectives to the study of OSH policy and practice.

Please apply using the form at www.iosh.co.uk/researchprog.aspx. The process will be in one stage, and we must receive your proposal by 07 September 2012. Please make further enquiries about the programme by email to the Programme Director, Professor Robert Dingwall, at robert.dingwall@ntlworld.com.