

Industrial Relations Unit (IRRU)

Seminar Speaker Series – Summer 2024 (Term 3)



Speakers:

Barbara Bechter (Durham University) and Manuela Galetto (IRRU, WBS)

Research Team

(alphabetical order)

Barbara Bechter, Inga Blaziene, Jan Czarzasty, Manuela Galetto, Ramune Guobait, Linda Hiltunen, Bengt Larsson, Dominik Owczarek, Maciej Pańków, Sabrina Weber.

Title:

**Occupational Health and Safety in the hospital and care sectors:
a comparative, multi-level analysis of risks and response-abilities in the EU**

Date:

Wednesday 24 April 2024

Venue:

WBS and online via Zoom

Time:

12:30 – 14:00 (GMT)

Abstract:

In this comparative project, we explored how social partners (trade unions and employer organisations) at national and European levels contribute to occupational health and safety (H&S) in the hospital and social care service sectors (elderly care services in particular). These sectors are characterised by similar health risks for their workers, as emerged during the pandemic, but also by markedly different organisations and providers, in terms of size, public, private, for/not for profit, religious nature, as well as different industrial relations systems and structures of employee representation for H&S.

At the EU level, the Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work (Directive 89/391 EEC) outlines minimum H&S measure for employees in Europe, which member states are expected to maintain, as well as allowed to strengthen. Social partners are given a prominent role by the Directive to promote H&S in the workplace. However, the provision and governance of H&S are articulated along variable institutional settings, involving multiple actors at different levels.

We adopted an actor-centred institutionalist approach to study such multi-level governance of H&S in the EU. We were interested in understanding the extent to which this system is coordinated and effective. As we often hear, patients and care service users are safe when workers are safe, so an effective intervention will ensure better quality ('fit for purpose') and wider coverage (type of care workers and employment status) of good H&S protection for health and care workers.

In 2022 and 2023, we conducted 64 interviews with national and EU level social partners of these sectors in 6 countries (Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden,

United Kingdom). This includes 49 interviews with national, sector level representatives of trade unions and employers in the six countries. Thirty of these organisations are affiliated with EPSU (European Public Sector Union), HOSPEEM (European Hospital and Healthcare Employers Association), or the Federation of European Social Employers, i.e. they have some form of involvement and engagement with the European level of sectoral social dialogue.

The findings show similarities (in terms of H&S risks) and differences (in terms of social partners' ability to respond) across sectors and countries. Legislation on occupational H&S is the primary source of regulation, but collective bargaining plays a complementary role in all countries, albeit to different degrees. Two effects were particularly interesting. First of all, compliance with legal, nationally established H&S standards is variable across member states and largely depends on enforcement mechanisms and institutions. H&S is generally regarded as costly, and sanctions are sometimes found more economically efficient; enforcement needs to be combined with knowledge, skills, and sufficient human and financial resources. Workplace level structures of representation of H&S have a positive impact on enforcement. This is particularly so in case studies where there are mixed – union and non- union – systems of worker representation for H&S. Secondly, the extent to which social partners are involved in the definition of H&S policies and measures is key in facilitating information on H&S problems and solutions, both top- down and, crucially, bottom-up, i.e. the nature of the workplace structure of worker representation in the area of H&S can facilitate feedback to the employers and intervention to reduce risks;

Finally, although the EU level is a key source of H&S regulation, coordination with the national level remains rather weak.

Link to the full report of the project:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/media/durham-university-business-school/research-centres/centre-for-organisations-and-society/HEROS-VS-2021-0234-Final-Project-Report-October-2023.pdf>

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