

## **CREATING SAFETY CULTURES AMONG UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA, GHANA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Safety culture is shared and accepted attitudes, beliefs and practices supported by documented policies and procedures in an organization which influences employees' perceptions and behaviors within a workplace. Analysis of safety culture is important in institutions in order to identify potential areas of improvement. The objective of this study was to evaluate safety culture amongst administrators in UEW. Fifty respondents comprising 10 senior members, 10 senior staff and 30 junior staff participated in this study. Data was collected through self administered questionnaires. The results recorded low perceptions and awareness levels, lack of adequate safety training and non existence of safety reward schemes amongst the administrative group. Based on these results the study recommends an improvement in employees' safety perception and satisfaction leading to an enhancement of safety culture.*

**KEY WORDS:** safety culture, perception, universities, safety training, safety measures

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A safety culture commonly encompasses achieving a healthy and safe environment through compliance with all regulatory requirements and university safety policies. According to Gadd and Collins (2002) health and safety programme leads to an increase in morale, reduction in workplace incidents, injuries and insurance cost. The benefits of a safety culture include enhanced reputation with stakeholders such as students, parents/guardians, partners, sponsors and the wider community thereby attracting more students and employees. Ensuring safety at the workplace is therefore is the responsibility of both the employer and the employee. The employer is expected to ensure there is conducive working environment by providing the necessary tools, equipment and resources to aid work and also safeguard the safety of its employees. Likewise the employee is also expected to be aware and conscious of his/her working environment, use of safety equipment and what to do in case of any work related hazards. Once employees are conscious, it becomes a part of their daily practices by ensuring that their actions or inactions do not lead to injuries, accidents or incidents. Employees with a positive attitude towards safety are guided by the institutional commitment and regulations to safety in which each member upholds their own safety and that of their co-workers.

Flin, Mearns, Fleming and Gordon (1996) describe safety culture commonly as the values, perceptions, attitudes, norms, beliefs, practices, policies and behaviours of personnel on safety. One of the most comprehensive definitions concerning safety culture is by the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC, 2011). The NRC defines safety culture as “an organization’s collective commitment by leaders and individuals to emphasize safety as an overriding priority to competing goals and other considerations to ensure protection of people and the environment” This implies that there should be a resolute commitment by the entire organization to ensure an effective safety program is embraced by all. The American Chemical Society publication (ACS, 2012)) further explains that safety culture must emanate from ethical, moral, and practical considerations such as members actions, attitudes, and behaviours.

In Ghana safety cultures are increasingly becoming recognized as an important strategy to improving the widespread deficits in safety in the work place (Flin, Mearns, Flemming & Gordon, 1996) and to safeguard the security of employees. Available statistics indicate that about 734 persons sustained various kinds of injury with 55 fatalities in 1997 at workplaces in Ghana. Another 898 work-related injuries and 54 deaths were recorded in 1998. In 1999 alone, 57 fatalities occurred with 1,190 injuries (Micah & Aikins, 2002).

In academia it is also expected that academic administrators, faculties, and staff members will have ethical responsibilities to care for their own safety, students’ safety and to instill awareness about safety. In furtherance of this duty, faculties for example need to teach students the safety skills required especially in laboratories on campus and in the workplace. In a strong safety culture, both staff and students are able to assess the risk of exposures to those hazards, to minimize the risk of exposures to hazards, and to be prepared to respond to all forms of emergencies.

Devastating workplace incidents and accident in offices in Ghana have in recent times elevated concerns about the safety cultures in institutions. In 2009 fire gutted the 10-storey building belonging to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and destroyed vital documents including those dating back to Ghana’s independence from Britain from 1957. According to Victor Gbeho (2009) presidential adviser on Foreign Affairs, “this is a big blow to us. In fact all our documents have been destroyed by the fire. Everything is a total mess” (GNA/AFP, 2009). Again on Monday 28<sup>th</sup> October 2013, fire destroyed consumables at the Winneba Municipal Government hospital (Ghana News Agency, 2013). Then on 19<sup>th</sup> December, 2013 a fire outbreak at the sole commissioner’s office at the judgment Debt commission destroyed documents and equipment. This has resulted in calls beyond policy directives to ensure safety education and also building a strong academic safety culture both within and outside of the academic community.

This study therefore seeks to gauge the level of awareness on safety issues amongst administrators in UEW as well as the environment in which they work. This is because as

indicated earlier, occupational safety must be a concern of all employees in the workplace regardless of their job position (Pidgeon and O'Leary, 1994).

### **Research Problem**

A number of studies have been conducted on safety cultures in diversified fields such as construction, manufacturing, petroleum and aviation among other industries. However there are limited researches conducted and documented for the learning institutions which also have a health and safety risk. As such most universities have paid little or no attention to the possible safety risk within their working environments, hence the need for this study

### **Rationale**

The objective of the study is to evaluate safety culture amongst administrators in University of Education, Winneba (UEW). The study will further interrogate how the UEW policy agenda on health and safety translates in the day to day administration of the University. The findings which will inform policy directives will also make staff of the university conscious of their responsibilities towards ensuring their own safety, safeguarding that of their colleagues and the institution as a whole.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching question for the study was: "How are safety cultures created and maintained amongst administrators in the University of Education, Winneba"?

The following sub- questions guided the collection of data for this study:

1. What are the perceptions and level of awareness on health and safety cultures amongst administrators in UEW
2. How do administrators assess the health and safety measures in the University of Education, Winneba
3. What are the barriers that militate against the building and maintenance of a strong health and safety culture amongst administrators in UEW

### **UEW Safety Culture in context**

Under the Factory, Offices and Shop Act 1970, Act (328) and the Labour Act 2003, Act 651 of Ghana, employers are required to give employees orientation on legislation governing Occupational health and safety (OHS). In addition copies of OHS policy are to be made available to all employees and they are to be trained on health and safety practices to ensure incident free workplace environment.

In line with this requirement the University of Education, Winneba had developed a health and safety policy and a health and sanitation policy. The policy has an ethical as well as legal responsibility to provide a safe environment for both staff and students. In addition, UEW strives to foster the development of health and safety consciousness in all members of the university community for the purpose of minimizing the risk of injury to persons and damage to property

and facilities. As safety standards change, UEW is committed to keeping abreast of these changes, communicating these standards within all the campuses, and ensuring compliance on an ongoing basis. To this effect the university seeks to

- comply with all relevant statutes, regulations and standards of regulatory authorities representing occupational health and safety. UEW reserves the right to establish and enforce more stringent standards as may be considered appropriate.
- formulate and carry out continuing effective safety program appropriate to university operations, including instructional activities on all campuses and sites.
- give priority to a safe work environment in the planning and implementation of university activities.
- develop, implement and enforce health and safety practices and procedures under the authority of the university health and safety policy and through the structure of safety committees

## **RELATED LITERATURE**

Occupational health and safety hazard is a global issue that has received the attention of the international community. In the 2002 World Health Report for the World Health Organisation (WHO), workplace hazards are responsible globally for 37 percent of back pain, 16 percent of hearing loss, 13 percent of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), 11 percent of asthma, 10 percent of injuries, 10 percent of lung cancer and 3 percent of leukaemia (WHO, 2002). According to Milkovich and Boudreau (1991) these safety hazards are those aspects of the work environment, which have the potential for immediate and sometimes violent harm to an employee. Examples are loss of hearing or eyesight, cuts, sprains, bruises and broken bones, burns and electric shocks. Health hazards are those aspects of work environment that slowly and cumulatively lead to deterioration of an employee's health. Typical causes include physical and biological hazards, toxic and cancer-causing dusts and chemicals, and stressful working conditions.

Poor work postures also usually result in musculo-skeletal problems including back pain. Studies have found that poor posture among computer users is an independent risk factor for musculoskeletal disorders of the neck and shoulders. According to Marshall (2002) computer use can put one in severe health situations. It deforms the thoracic and cervical spine to a point where serious well-being concerns are foreseeable. In his "Oh, My Aching Back!" in *Occupational Health & Safety* journal, Marshall (2002) observes; "we do not as a whole, sit with proper posture when using our computers. We slouch, we hunch over and perhaps we sit cross-legged or curl our legs under our seats". Stress has been associated with various ailments suffered by health workers including hypertension.

Cox and Flin (1998) have suggested that employee attitudes are one of the most important measures of safety climate and culture because they are often influenced by other features of the

working environment. While Lee (1998) proposed that attitudes toward safety are a basic element of safety culture. Any safety interventions may fail if the attitudes and perceptions of safety are not taken into account (Williamson, Feyer, Cairns & Biancotti, 1997).

## METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

This pilot study is underpinned by the philosophical standpoint that reality is a social construct which is experienced differently. As the issue under investigation is a social issue, we adopted an interpretive approach as the data was interpreted in the context of the administrators' perception, awareness and experience with the safety practices in their working environment in UEW. In terms of research design a descriptive research design was employed for this study. Descriptive research is concerned with conditions or relationships that exist, practices that prevail, beliefs, processes that are going on, effects that are being felt or trends that are developing (Somekh & Lewin, 2011).

A structured questionnaire was used to obtain data from the respondents. The questionnaire was designed to capture the respondents' perceptions, attitudes and awareness on the current safety culture in the university at the time of the study. The sample was drawn from the entire administrative population. The identified sample was further divided into three strata: junior staff, senior staff and senior members. In all fifty respondents were sampled through the random sampling method. It constituted 31 (62%) male and 19 (38%) females. Out of this number there were 10 senior member, 10 senior staff and thirty (30) junior staff.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

**Table 1**  
**Respondents by sex**

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Senior members</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Senior staff</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Junior staff</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>30</b>

### **Perceptions and levels of awareness on health and safety cultures amongst administrators in UEW**

The respondents made it emphatically clear that orientation on workplace safety is not very encouraging. This is identified in the answers drawn from question 5 of the questionnaire. Most of the respondents answered in the affirmative suggesting they were not taken through basic safety orientation which is a necessity and a requirement under the Factory, Offices and Shop Act 1970, Act (328) and the Labour Act 2003, Act 651 of Ghana. Thirty two (32) respondents representing 64% of the sample size responded they had no safety orientation. Eighteen (18)

respondents representing 36% said they had received orientation and this group largely falls within the junior staff category.

Safety training is one of the core pillars in effective administrative systems. Though the respondents suggest some workers had received training on safety issues the training received according to them was not sufficient. Effectively 28% admitted they had received some form of training with majority of them, 72% not having the slightest idea about safety training at work. One of the respondents remarked: *“there is poor safety training for new workers especially temporary workers like interns and service personnel and the disabled. For example I was not given any training on emergency exits and assembly points and the use of the fire extinguishers in case of emergency”*

Another respondent remarked *“for my training from a previous job on safety at work, I was able to give a mouth to mouth resuscitation procedure to a student before taking the student to the hospital for further treatment”*. The respondent further remarked *“but for this training I wouldn't know what would have happened to this student”*

Further analysis at the responses particularly from the junior and senior staff category reflects the poor supply of recommended safety gear such as safety boots, goggles, gloves, chairs and desks, ventilation and compulsory periodic medical check-ups. All the respondents complained about poor lightning system on campus at night which endangers the life of all.

### **Assessment of the health and safety measures in the University of Education, Winneba**

In considering how the respondents assess the health and safety measures in UEW, varying opinion were expressed. The table below represents the overall responses on safety measures in UEW but five of these namely fire extinguishers, evacuation and assembly points, recommended chiropractic chairs and desks, compulsory routine medical checks and reward for safety alertness will be discussed.

Table 2: Assessment of safety measures at UEW

SAFETY MEASURES	Excellent		Good		Fair		Poor		Very poor	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Marked emergency fire exits	3	6	4	8	32	64	6	12	4	8
Fire extinguishers	2	4	4	8	36	72	3	6	5	10
Fire hose and hydrants	1	2	2	4	3	6	38	76	6	12
Emergency exit for disabled	3	6	4	8	6	12	12	24	24	48
Evacuation and assembly points	1	2	4	8	10	20	15	30	18	36
Smoke detectors	7	14	10	20	9	18	20	40	4	8
Metal detectors	2	4	1	2	1	2	39	78	7	14
Protective gear (if applicable)	5	10	9	18	11	22	17	34	10	20
Recommended chiropractic chairs and desks	9	18	12	24	10	20	14	28	3	6
Electrical installations	13	26	15	30	10	20	11	22	2	4
Electronic installations	12	24	10	20	13	26	7	14	8	16
Well demarcated Parking space	28	56	12	24	8	16	2	4	-	-
Parking space for disabled	-	-	-	-	-	-	39	78	4	8
Compulsory routine medical checks	3	6	4	8	15	30	13	26	15	30
Policy on health and safety	8	16	12	24	10	20	14	28	6	12
Accident log book	14	28	3	6	8	16	19	38	6	12
Management commitment to safety	8	16	14	28	9	18	14	28	5	10
Safety training	5	10	2	4	4	8	18	36	21	43
Reward for safety alertness	-	-	3	6	8	16	7	14	32	64
First aid	4	8	7	14	4	8	14	28	21	42

Fire extinguisher, or extinguisher, is an active fire protection device used to extinguish or control small fires, often in emergency situations before they get out of hand. In terms of managing fire at the workplace, seventy-two percent (72%) of the respondents recognized the presence of fire extinguishers on UEW campus but conceded had no knowledge on how they are used. The Ghana National Fire Service recommends that training is given every member of a household or office place on the use of extinguishers (Gokah, 2012) but he states that this has often not been the case. In view of this the tendency of an avoidable major fire disaster may not be averted.

Evacuation and assembly points are a designated place where people have been told to wait after evacuating a building in the event of a fire or other emergency. In the study, only 10% out of the total sample had an idea of what and where an emergency evacuation point was. The remaining 90% either did not know where UEW had its emergency assembly point or had no knowledge about it.

Respondents on the issue of chiropractic chairs and desks and ergonomic equipment rated it as improved. This constituted 42% of the respondents and the remaining 58% believes more needs to be done. According to Nelson, Lawrence, Triano (2005) chiropractic is a system of complementary medicine based on diagnosis and manipulative treatment of misalignment of the joints often associated with spinal column which are held to cause other disorders by affecting the nerves, muscle and the organs. *"In an institution like this where you spend a great deal of time sitting in an office chair and behind the desk, sitting in a position that adds stress to the structures in the spine, it's important to have an office chair and desk that's ergonomic and that supports the lower back and promotes good posture"* remarked a respondent.

Eighty six percent (86%) of the respondents rated compulsory routine medical checks as not adequately placed. This has not really helped in dealing with issues on work related stress and other on the job acquired health challenges.

On reward for safety alertness in UEW 64% rated it as very poor, 14% as poor, and 16% as fair, with only 6% indicating it was good. This indicates lack of safety reward and benefit program in the university. Reward for safety is a very important aspect in safety culture and management because it acts as a motivation to the staff to observe safety in their workplaces.

### **Barriers militating against achieving safety culture**

All the respondents listed the following as some of the barriers to achieving and improving safety at UEW. These are inadequate training and education, lack of routine workplace inspection and notification of health and safety hazards by safety officers, lack of reward and poor accident and incident reporting procedures.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that the university is apt in terms of provision of some safety equipment to enhance and safeguard employee's lives and reduce job related risks. However what was lacking was regular training in occupational health and safety for all categories of staff. The university hardly notified staff on health and safety hazards at the workplace. The workers were also not encouraged to report workplace health hazards and it did not provide adequate orientation and training on health and safety legislation. The perception on safety was poor which seemingly accounted for the poor safety culture amongst senior members, senior staff and junior staff of UEW.

## **Recommendations**

Several issues emerged from the findings and conclusions. It is therefore recommended that Management of UEW should:

- Provide notices to warn of hazards and organize mock drills supervised by the GNFS, Ghana Police service, Ghana Ambulance service, UEW security and other related agencies
- Human Resource Division should include health and safety training in its staff orientation and in-service training programmes;
- Should clearly mark evacuation and assembly points and emergency exit points
- Make all reasonable efforts to identify and correct health and safety hazards;
- Provide for the workplace system of work that is safe and without risk to life; Awareness on chiropractic and ergonomic practices should be encouraged
- Update the University's Health and Safety Policy document to reflect current OHS best practices and ensure that copies of the document is made available to all employees;
- Institute a laid down communication channel and procedures for staff to report of any identified workplace hazard for action to be taken to correct such hazards;
- Provide accident and incident log books and a point to lodge complaints
- Ensure that supervisors supervise the utilisation of personal protective equipment
- An in-depth audit on occupational health and safety measures is conducted

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