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**SAFETY
+ HEALTH
FOR ALL**

Executive Summary

**Occupational safety and health
professionals at the workplace level**

**A review of qualification systems
and regulatory approaches in
selected countries**



Context

Globally, the qualifications required to perform occupational safety and health (OSH) functions within organizations vary considerably. These variations are influenced by factors such as differences in regulation, the role and reach of professional associations, the formalization of ethical practices, and the establishment of qualification frameworks. Knowledge is limited on the approaches and trends that can ensure OSH professionals have the qualifications to meet the needs of countries and enterprises. Until now, there has been no comprehensive overview of the different elements that make up an OSH qualification system.

To fill this knowledge gap, the ILO conducted research on OSH professionals' qualification systems in 14 countries from various regions representing a variety of situations: Australia, Canada, France, Indonesia, Jamaica, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Spain, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Viet Nam. This research was conducted as part of a project funded by the Government of the Republic of Korea on "[Improving occupational safety and health qualifications frameworks](#)" and implemented under the ILO's [Safety + Health for All](#) flagship programme in line with its [strategy](#).

For the first time a research report provides a comprehensive summary of OSH qualification systems across different countries. The findings illustrate the differences and similarities between countries in terms of regulation, professional associations, job titles, duties and tasks, education and training, competence, experience, professional development, ethical practice, and key themes related to entering the profession and emerging challenges faced by the profession.

The research focuses on professionals with relevant qualifications that provide either safety-related functions or health-related functions or a mixture of both at the workplace, and who are responsible for the overall safety and health management in the workplace. These personnel could be referred to as safety and health professionals appointed by the employer at the workplace to manage OSH.

The research approach included a combination of desktop document analysis and consultation with subject matter experts within each targeted country. The rationale for selecting these 14 countries was to provide a diverse array of arrangements concerning the regulation and qualification systems of OSH professionals, to include both developed and developing countries, and to cover countries from various regions.

An additional participatory workshop was conducted with a group of OSH specialists, representatives from governments, professional associations and universities across regions to extrapolate the results of the research and answer two key discussion questions: "What are the OSH qualification needs of developing countries?" and "What additional future research is required?".

This executive summary presents key findings of the research and outputs from the workshop. The full report of findings can be accessed [here](#).¹ The report is intended for government agencies, political decision-makers, workers' and employers' organizations, professional associations, training and educational institutions, OSH professionals, and for any other actor involved in the implementation and development of OSH qualification systems.

¹ ILO, Occupational safety and health professionals at the workplace level: a review of qualification systems and regulatory approaches in selected countries (2023).

Key findings

Regulation of OSH professionals

Research findings reveal significant variations in the regulation of OSH professionals across the reviewed countries. Legislation in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom is similarly non-specific in their references to OSH professionals. In contrast, the United States (at the federal level) has regulations similar to the principle-based approaches of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, but also include provisions for federally regulated institutions and enterprises. On the other end of the legislative spectrum, countries such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, Viet Nam and Thailand have highly prescriptive requirements for OSH professionals, and utilize multiple OSH professional roles, each defined with nuanced and specific legislated functions, tasks, and education/training requirements.

European countries like France and Spain have different approaches to regulating the OSH profession compared to Commonwealth countries. French legislation has moderate/general requirements for the role known as the “competent employee” that employers must engage to assist with OSH duties. An employer without internal skills or resources can hire a professional belonging to his occupational health service or an external practitioner. Spain has a similar approach, but is more prescriptive in the duties, tasks and educational requirements, which is similar to legislation found in South-East Asian countries. Additionally, Spain and some South-East Asian countries have additional OSH roles with varying and specific capability levels in their national legislation. Obligations on employers in both Spain and South-East Asian countries vary based on criteria such as enterprise size and level of risks.

One South-East Asian country stands out as different – Singapore. Singapore strikes a balance between prescription and flexibility. Specific roles are defined in legislation, along with general requirements regarding training and professional development and minimum standards of qualification for certain roles. However, the specific tasks and duties, as well as the technical specialities required of each OSH professional role, can be adapted and modified to suit the organizational or industrial context.

Professional associations

In most countries where OSH professionals are not legislated, there are significant variations in OSH qualification systems that are driven by professional associations, industries, and employers' organizations. In many Western countries with principle-based OSH legislation, (e.g., Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom), professional regulation is achieved informally through professional associations and their membership and certification requirements (e.g., mandatory professional development and minimum qualification levels). These associations provide a range of services that focus mainly on education and training, ensuring competence and ongoing professional development, as well as promoting the profession and profession-related research.

Competence, education and training

The education and training opportunities for OSH professionals across the reviewed countries can vary greatly and involve multiple stakeholders. These stakeholders may include universities, private and public training organizations, professional associations, OSH institutions, and workers' and employers' organizations.

In countries with “soft” or less prescriptive OSH legislation, education and training is a thriving industry with a wide variety of options available. These options include: informal training provided by private organizations (e.g., advanced practice courses which focus on non-technical skills such as leadership and knowledge of OSH science); vocational courses provided by registered training organizations in both the public sector and private sectors; as well as undergraduate and postgraduate degrees offered through universities. The mechanisms for ensuring the quality of OSH education and training can vary but typically include: public audits and inspections of registered training organizations and registration schemes; specified curricula and education topics identified by international and national standards organizations; and third-party auditing. In the case of Australia, there is also a dedicated OSH qualification accreditation board for universities offering OSH courses and programmes.

Among the countries studied, those with highly prescriptive regulations were found to be inconsistent in the enforcement of OSH education and training requirements, and the maintenance of course quality. Mandatory training of OSH professionals in these countries is often minimal. In some countries, inconsistencies were reported between required qualifications and actual needs in the workplace. As per the interviews conducted, many countries where education is specified in legislation seem to suffer from issues such as inadequate workplace contextualization, and overlap or redundancy with existing qualifications. This is particularly the case for OSH professionals with extended practical and/or professional experience. In countries applying prescriptive requirements — and those with non-prescriptive training requirements — varying degrees of competence were found between small and larger enterprises.

At a global level, there have been some efforts to establish guidelines regarding the competence and experience requirements of the OSH profession coordinated through global competency and/or capability frameworks.² At country level, the Singapore Government has developed a Skills Framework for Workplace Safety and Health together with industry associations, training providers and workers' organizations. The Framework offers a comprehensive suite of knowledge and skill requirements for different OSH professional roles.

² Two examples are the *Occupational Health & Safety Professional Capability Framework* compiled by the International Network of Safety and Health Professional Organisations (INSHPO) (2017), and the *Professional Standards for Safety and Health at Work* developed by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) (2019).

Continuing professional development

As for continuing professional development (CPD), in most reviewed countries there are no requirements outside what is required to maintain memberships and/or certifications conferred by professional bodies. These certifications typically specify a minimum number of “points” that must be achieved to maintain status. Different professional development activities (e.g., online training and participation in conferences) may constitute different points. Some professional associations also randomly audit members’ professional development to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Only Korea, Singapore, and Viet Nam were found to have clear legislative requirements for CPD. In the Republic of Korea, for instance, employers must ensure that every two years OSH professionals complete a minimum of 24 hours of CPD, in enterprises with 50 and more workers, or a minimum of eight hours, in enterprises with 20–49 workers.

Certification and registration

Similarly, only six of the 14 countries reviewed require OSH professionals to be certified and/or registered by law (France, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam). Certification is generally a system designed to verify and validate competence through a structured assessment process. Registration is keeping an ongoing record of who is practicing in the profession. In most countries reviewed, certification was optional and voluntary for OSH professionals, and primarily used as a mechanism to improve competitiveness in employment contexts. Singapore is different in that it has a government-managed mandatory register and certification system for OSH professionals.

Ethics and professional practice

Research findings found that none of the countries reviewed currently have or endorse an ethical code as part of their legislation. Instead, it seems that countries rely primarily on professional associations to establish, monitor, and enforce ethical conduct. In those countries without a strong professional association and a lack of ethical codes of conduct or standards, there is consequently limited recourse to ensure that high standards are maintained and that practices align with ethical principles.

Entry into the profession

The promotion and overall awareness of the OSH profession is currently low globally, according to subject experts interviewed for this research. Interviewees stated that across most countries, OSH professionals tend to enter the profession due to either a personal direct or indirect experience with workplace safety and health or as a later career move after working in an operational or production-oriented role. Furthermore, interviewees agreed that OSH awareness amongst secondary school graduates and tertiary students is generally low and more could be done to increase the visibility of the profession and make it a more appealing and attractive career choice, particularly among university-educated graduates. Initiatives, such as the HASANZ’s Health & Safety Generalist Pathway in New Zealand, are setting examples for other countries of how to promote awareness of the profession.

Emerging challenges for the profession

Key emerging challenges identified in the interviews with OSH experts include the management of psychosocial risks, the changing world of work and job design (such as the gig economy and telework), and the introduction of new technologies with unknown risks. The experts highlighted that psychosocial hazard identification and management traditionally have been excluded from OSH professional's skill sets, but that this is changing now, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. The changing world of work also poses challenges for OSH professionals as they will need to adapt to new ways of working and new types of workers such as gig economy workers. Additionally, emerging technologies and public health emergencies are also concerns for OSH professionals as they will need to quickly identify and manage new hazards as they arise.

Potential for further research and country support

The current research project covered numerous research questions, which were useful in gaining an appreciation of existing national qualification systems. For future research, more in depth research into OSH competency frameworks and education could be done, potentially through identifying countries with sophisticated frameworks and analysing their main features in more detail. Other areas of possible research include: i) ethical practices within different national cultures; ii) approaches to supervision and effectiveness; iii) identifying required skill sets of OSH professionals in a changing world of work; iv) collaboration modalities between stakeholders involved in OSH qualification systems (including policymakers, industry actors, social partners, professional associations and training institutions); v) investigating advantages and disadvantages of different OSH regulatory approaches, including industry-specific regulations; vi) exploring the value of certification programmes; vii) improving options for the promotion of entry into the profession; and viii) the professionalization of OSH.

Multi-stakeholder discussions also concluded that a guide is needed to support developing countries in the assessment and improvement of their OSH qualification systems. Such a guide would take into consideration the various dimensions of OSH qualification systems, including offering different approaches and their advantages and limits. The guide would also be adaptable to different contexts, and offer options to respond to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises.

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