

EDUCATING FUTURE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS FOR EXCELLENT STRESS MANAGEMENT ACROSS EUROPE

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Abstract

In particularly challenging times of steadily increasing numbers of burnout in European workplaces, we propose in the frame of the IMPRESS project (Project reference: 588315-EPP-1-2017-1-ES-EPPKA2-KA funded by Erasmus Plus) an innovative curriculum for HEI students in organizational psychology focusing on excellent stress management. Young people entering the labour market have to be prepared to sustain their health in a stressful and economic situation where changing employers and sectors is becoming part of a regular employment history. This is currently even more present in times of the COVID-19 pandemic that changes work requirements including much more remote work. Future Human Resource practitioners need to understand the importance of fostering employee well-being as pillar of organizations' competitive advantage, talent attraction and retention, and employee performance. The proposed curriculum is based on results of an online survey that found similar work-related stress factors in four countries (ES, DE, IR, LV) showing the high need of European companies for Human Resource Management competences related to occupational health, thus arguing for a unified HEI curriculum proposal.

Following the scientist-practitioner model, HEIs as well as practitioners of the above-mentioned countries developed a curriculum including assessment and excellence-related competences for stress-management based on online tools. As a first pilot has been carried out with Bachelor students of Organizational Psychology, a fine-tuned theory-seminar package was developed and run in a Bachelor course for psychology students of Organizational Behaviour. The developed learning material covered a) a self-assessment, b) theoretical knowledge about state-of-the-art research on occupational stress management, c) a problem-based role-playing scenario, and d) a real case study for student teams.

An evaluation of the competences, the self-assessment, learning material, and case study showed satisfactory results.

The IMPRESS project is a prime example of how to integrate innovative applied tools into HEI curricula as both learning medium and future working tool. Moreover, all training materials can be deployed virtually and have interactive components such as knowledge quizzes and group work.

Keywords: Occupational health, stress management, research project, organizational psychology, self-assessment.

1 INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation, tertiarization, and globalization (as well as the ongoing pandemic) have increased the exposure of employees all over Europe to psychosocial risk factors ([1], [2]). Backed up by empirical evidence, survey results of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (OSHA) show an increasing level and relevance of stress at work over the past years ([1], [3], [4], [5]). Psychosocial risk factors and resulting work-related stress are associated with decreased mental health, depression, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders ([1]). This is why psychosocial risk management is a business imperative, not only manifested in European and national policies but also as a significant driver for competitive advantage ([6]). However, despite increased awareness of the emerging challenge of work-related stress, European companies still consider the assessment of psychosocial risk factors more burdensome than the assessment of physical and easily tangible risk factors ([5]). Reasons for this may be next to bureaucratic efforts a lack of timely and personnel resources, and a lack of expertise or specialist support ([5]). Thus, current and future employees need to be trained to master successfully psychosocially demanding work situations, and moreover, current

and future health practitioners across Europe need to be trained to provide effective solutions for excellent stress management.

The IMPRESS (Improving management competences on Excellence based Stress avoidance and working towards Sustainable organisational development in Europe; Project reference: 588315-EPP-1-2017-1-ES-EPPKA2-KA funded by Erasmus Plus) project aimed at developing insights into work related stress issues in health and social care organisations, with the goal to develop approaches for early recognition of stress potentials and training modules that allow reacting to them and preventing the outbreak of stress.

Following a scientist-practitioner approach, HEIs as well as practitioners of the above-mentioned countries developed a curriculum including assessment and excellence-related competences for stress-management based on online tools.

The assessment of psychosocial risk factors is not standardized yet. Studies in the digitalized work environment which integrate classic as well as “new” stressors emerging from work 4.0 such as technostress ([7]) and at the same time investigate cross cultural differences do not yet exist. This is why a self-reported questionnaire based on a theoretical model by Reif, Spieß and Stadler ([8]) and also taking into account Demerouti and Bakker’s Job Demands–Resources model ([9]) was developed and tested in four countries, namely Ireland, Spain, Germany, and Latvia.

The comprehensive questionnaire included 123 items on stressors (task, working conditions & workflow, team climate & cooperation, roles & responsibilities, attitudes & behaviors, organizational climate & communication), resources (control & clarity, leadership & social support), negative outcomes (illness & strain), and positive outcomes (engagement & satisfaction). 979 employees participated in the online survey. Participants rated a) the extent of relief (“Please read these aspects and when answering think of your current work situation. To what degree does this aspect cause you RELIEF?”) on the following scale: not at all, very little, to some degree, to a great degree, to a very great degree; b) the frequency (“Please read these aspects and when answering think of your current work situation. How often did this aspect occur in the last month?”) on the scale: never, rarely, some-times, often, very often) of the given aspects (Figure 1). The self-assessment tool was iteratively finetuned and a final solution developed within the software frame provided by one of the project partners. Within this tool, assessment results and related intervention solutions were presented.



Figure 1. Stress Factor Assessment.

With the aim to provide effective training solutions that are based on the respective assessment, which can be either individual or organizational, an E-learning tool was developed. This knowledge-based training tool was built in a modular way so that it can be used as flexible repository easily adaptable for any specific HEI curriculum. Based on the assessment, that allows facilitating preventive as well as

corrective measures, specifically selected training modules will be offered to the students. All training units would kick-off with a module about general knowledge on stress management, followed by particular learning modules for the assessed psychosocial risk factors and to promote relevant resources.

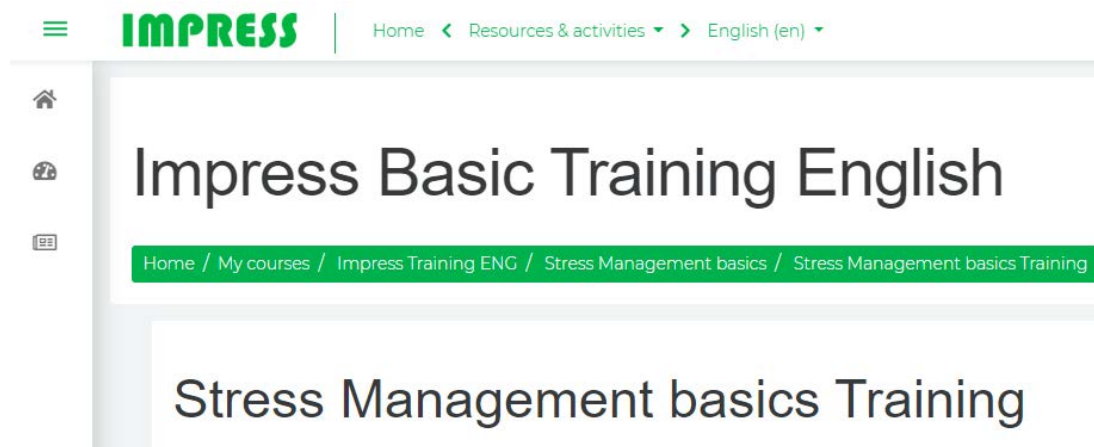


Figure 2. IMPRESS E-learning platform.

The following section describes the roll-out of the learning tools into an existing curriculum in more detail. The existing curriculum represented the mandatory course of Organizational Psychology for Psychology Bachelor students at University of Barcelona. Participants are usually in their third year of study with an average year of 21.

2 METHODOLOGY

The integration of the IMPRESS tools into the existing curriculum of an organizational psychology Bachelor course was as follows: As a first pilot has been carried out with Bachelor students of organizational psychology, a fine-tuned theory-seminar package was developed and run in a Bachelor course for psychology students of organizational behaviour in the course 2019-2020. The developed learning material covered a) the online self-assessment tool, b) theoretical knowledge about state-of-the-art research on occupational stress management, c) a problem-based role-playing scenario, and d) a real case study for student teams.

In a first theory class, relevant research and applied theoretical models were lectured to build a solid knowledge base. The developed training modules from the E-learning platform served as repository. Each student was then invited to run the self-assessment tool and to reflect on its results in the plenum. By this, students learned to use the tool from an applied perspective as future practitioners. As part of off-class student group work, a comprehensive case study about occupational health issues and solutions in a hospital was carried out to the students. In a subsequent practical seminar, students were provided with a role-playing scenario, to transform the theoretical knowledge into embodied experiences. The scenario was based on the frame of the overall case study, and student groups presented their played characters after preparation to the plenum in class. Provided guiding questions for the role-playing session facilitated knowledge assessment of the students after the presentations. The role play and its concept analysis was evaluated by two observers and teachers. The student group work was presented as virtual presentations by each group and handed in as written assignments at the end of the semester. It was evaluated using a standardized rubric.

3 RESULTS

For evaluation purposes, theoretical competences about stress management were evaluated following a multiple-choice test design, evaluating the seminars with marks of 9,4 from 10 points. Applied skills and competences were evaluated within the student group work, where students applied theory to the real company case, with marks of 8,9 from 10 points.

Within the course, students were also invited to provide anonymous feedback to the IMPRESS curriculum: Based on standardized and short online evaluation surveys, future fine-tuning of the class

materials can be managed to continuously educate future occupational health practitioners. Preliminary evaluations show satisfactory results and the application of online tools as well as embodied learning practices seem to be effective and enjoyable for most of the students.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The IMPRESS project is a prime example of how to integrate innovative applied tools into HEI curricula as both learning medium and future working tool. Moreover, all training materials can be deployed virtually and have interactive components such as knowledge quizzes and group work.

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