

A Whole Systems Approach to Promoting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as Healthy Workplaces

An Exploratory Case Study

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Introduction

A *healthy university* adopts a holistic understanding of health, takes a whole campus approach, and aspires to create an environment and culture that enhances the health and wellbeing of the university community (U.K Healthy Universities Network, 2006), including employees. This description is adapted within the Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter and Framework Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2021) with the term *healthy university* replaced with the term *healthy campus*. The Edmonton Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (World Health Organization, 2005), the Okanagan Charter (Okanagan Charter, 2015), the Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter and Framework Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2021) and the Limerick Framework for Action (International Health Promoting Campuses Network and University of Limerick, 2025) all call for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to adopt a *whole systems approach* to promoting health and wellbeing from a policy and practice perspective, including for employees. Despite these calls, there is limited evidence on how Irish HEIs operationalise a whole systems approach to promoting a healthy workplace for their employees, or what factors enable or inhibit a whole systems approach to be operationalised in a university setting. Similarly, the strengths of and opportunities for improvements to current approaches to promoting Irish HEIs as healthy workplaces is under researched. This information gap provides the impetus for this exploratory case study with a sample of two Irish universities.

Study Objectives

- Explore how differently constituted universities (n=2) conceptualise and operationalise a whole systems approach to promoting a healthy workplace for employees.
- Explore factors that enable or inhibit the implementation of a whole systems approach to promoting a healthy workplace and a healthy workplace experience for employees.
- Explore the strengths of, and opportunities for improvement to current approaches being implemented to promote a healthy workplace.

Methods

Research Design: Exploratory Qualitative Case Study

Sampling: Purposive Sampling

Units of Analysis/Case Study Sites:

SITE 1 is governed by the Technological Universities Act, 2018

SITE 2 is governed by the Universities Act, 1997

Data Collection Methods:

- Document Analysis-Completed
- Semi-Structured Interviews-Completed
- Focus Groups- *Not commenced.

Data Analysis: Qualitative Content Analysis

Conceptual Framework:

The Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter and Framework Ireland (2021) is adopted as the conceptual framework for a Whole Systems Approach.



Figure 1 Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter and Framework (2021) Categories

Results

Document Analysis

Case Study Site	Document Corpus	Document Category
SITE 1	18	Governance Document (15) Programme Document (1) Process Document (1) Performance Document (1)
SITE 2	22	Governance Document (15) Programme Document (1) Performance Document (6)
Document Corpus: 40 Documents		

Table 1 Document Corpus



Figure 2 Document Analysis Key Findings

Semi-Structured Interviews

10 semi-structured interviews conducted with senior managers and health and wellbeing leads from the participating case study sites. SITE 1 (n=6) SITE 2 (n=4)

Key Finding: A whole systems approach to promoting a healthy workplace is not being operationalised by the case study sites



Figure 3 How A Whole Systems Approach is Conceptualised

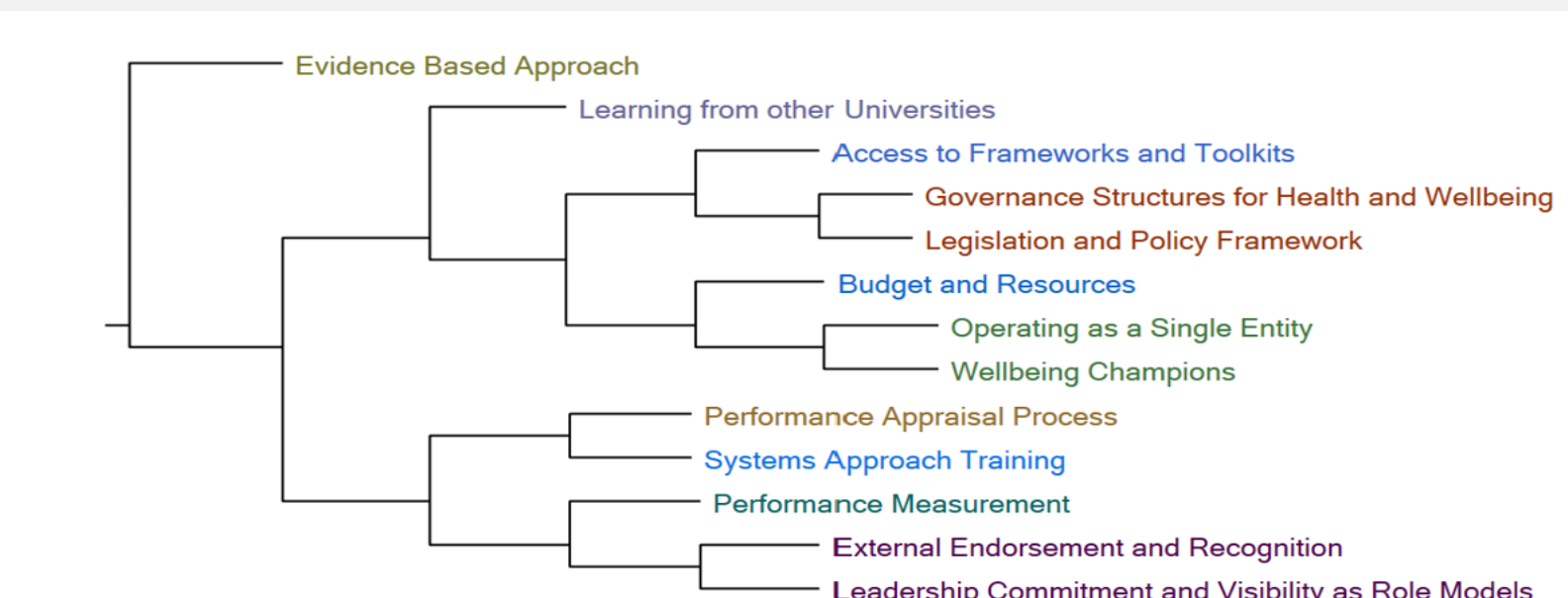


Figure 4 Enablers to a Whole Systems Approach

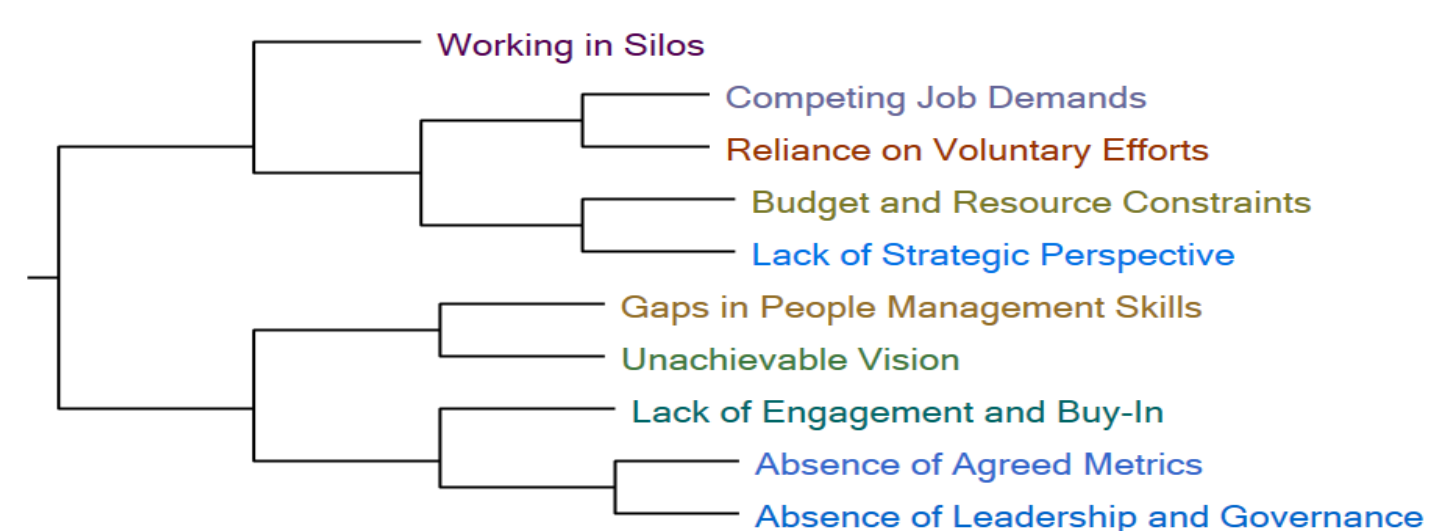


Figure 5 Inhibitors to a Whole Systems Approach



Figure 6 Opportunities for Improvement to Current Approaches

Conclusions

- Clear leadership commitment** to promoting employee health and wellbeing.
- Inhibitors to a whole system approach:** Siloed working; competing job demands; lack of engagement and buy in; lack of strategic perspective; gaps in people management skills; having an unachievable vision; an absence of agreed metrics; an absence of designated wellbeing leadership and governance structures, and budget and resource constraints.
- Opportunities for improvement reflect both a person and a systems focus:** Embed a culture that values and prioritises employee wellbeing; increase engagement; enable wellbeing conversations; build social connections; conduct a needs assessment; agree objectives, and ensure designated wellbeing leadership, governance and resources.

References

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