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## An international benchmark for the Australian OHS Body of Knowledge (BoK)



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### ABSTRACT

Benchmarking was used to compare the Australian SIA's (Safety Institute of Australia) OHS BoK with three different approaches to systemize the knowledge that should be taught by universities. The Australian Health and Safety Professionals Alliance (HaSPA) *Core Body of Knowledge for Generalist OHS Professionals* was benchmarked against three other international bodies of knowledge, the German Ergonomic Society's Body of Knowledge *Ergonomics – Core Definition, Object Catalogue and Research Domains*, the IEEE Computer Society *Software Engineering Body of Knowledge* and the American 'Association of Schools of Public Health' *Master's Degree in Public Health Core Competency Model*.

It was found that quality, structure and content of the OHS BoK ranked lowest when compared with the other benchmarked documents. The HaSPA body of knowledge was ranked poorly when compared to the German Ergonomic Society's Body of Knowledge for Ergonomics, IEEE Computer Society Software Engineering Body of Knowledge and the American Association of Schools of Public Health Core Competency Model. Analysis and discussion of the HaSPA BoK is important given its use as an audit tool for tertiary education in Australia. Furthermore the International Network of Safety & Health Practitioner Organisations (INSHPPO) is apparently promoting the Australian SIA's OHS BoK as the basis of an international standard.

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### 1. Background

The focus of this analysis of the OHS BoK is directed towards its use as defining what should be taught in university courses. The content of tertiary courses in OHS has attracted the attention of government and scholars in Australia for at least 20 years; however the production of the OHS BoK took place in the context of the drive by the Safety Institute of Australia Ltd (SIA) to gain professional status for the generalist OHS professional. The development and implications of the SIA's professional project have been recently discussed in our companion paper, (Pearse et al., 2015).

In 2010, Toft et al. produced a report which advocated, inter alia, standardising tertiary OHS education and developing a core body of OHS knowledge. This report also reviewed previous publications on tertiary education in Australia and provides a useful background to the debates around tertiary education of OHS professionals in Australia.

Despite the longstanding calls for a core body of OHS knowledge very little progress was made until funding from the Victorian

Government provided the impetus for the compilation of the OHS BoK, (HaSPA, 2012). This government funding was made available to tackle the problem of incorrect advice being provided by some OHS consultants and it was thought that certification of OHS consultants would improve the quality of OHS advice. Consequently the Australian Health and Safety Professionals Alliance (HaSPA) was funded by the Victorian state government to establish a certification process for OHS professionals (HaSPA, 2012). In the process of developing a structure for certifying professionals, HaSPA initiated an accreditation process for university undergraduate and post-graduate OHS courses.

This transition from the aim of certification of OHS professionals to the accreditation of university courses however was not made clear in any HaSPA publications. The HaSPA then established the Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board, (AOHSEAB) which decided to base its accreditation of university courses on the core "Body of Knowledge" (HaSPA BoK, Table 1), against which applicants were to be assessed.

The Health and Safety Professionals Alliance is an alliance of Australian OHS professional bodies and Victorian universities. It was formed in 2007 and funded by WorkSafe Victoria to improve OHS in Victorian workplaces through enhanced quality of OHS professionals. According to HaSPA:

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**Table 1**  
Benchmarked documents.

Issuing body and year	Professional project	Acronym	Benchmarked
Australian Health and Safety Professionals Alliance (HaSPA), 2012	Core Body of Knowledge for Generalist OHS Professionals	HaSPA BoK	Yes
Gesellschaft fuer Arbeitswissenschaft (GfA) (German Ergonomic Society), 1989	Ergonomics – Core Definition, Object Catalogue and Research Domains	GfA CD	Yes
American Association of Schools of Public Health, 2006	Core Competency Model for the Master's Degree in Public Health	ASPH CCM	Yes
IEEE, 2004	Software Engineering Body of Knowledge	SWEBoK	Yes

“The OHS Body of Knowledge is the collective knowledge that should be shared by Australian generalist OHS professionals to provide a sound basis for understanding the causation and control of work-related fatality, injury, disease and ill-health (FIDI). This knowledge can be described in terms of its key concepts and language, its core theories and related empirical evidence, and the application of these to facilitate a safe and healthy workplace”.

[HaSPA, 2012]

The foundation and structure of the HaSPA BoK does not appear to build from explicit disciplinary bases or an explicit underlying theory. Instead the HaSPA BoK consists of a collection of essays based on a number of concepts and a framework as indicated in Fig. 1 (HaSPA, 2012).

This framework led to the inclusion a large number of topics in the BoK.

The HaSPA BoK comprises about 811 pages in two introductory and 35 content chapters. Forty-five invited authors developed the HaSPA BoK in an exhaustive process (Fig. 2), and HaSPA states that they applied an “open and directed peer-review process”. We were not able to find a published description of how the authors were selected. The process was managed by the HaSPA BoK technical panel of eight, established by HaSPA. From the process description it appears that the Safety Institute Australia Ltd (SIA) had a significant influence on the development through its College of Fellows and the SIA holds the copyright for the BoK. In addition the high degree of overlapping membership makes it difficult to distinguish

distinct characteristics of each of these three organizations involved in the development of the BoK and accreditation of university OHS courses.

**2. Selecting bodies of knowledge and competencies for comparison and benchmarking**

A summary of Bodies of Knowledge and core competency definitions considered in this study, together with all the acronyms used in the text can be found in Table 1.

While HaSPA claim leadership and a world first process for the OHS profession by establishing the HaSPA BoK as a body of knowledge for the generalist OHS professional, a wide range of international institutions undertook similar exercises in the development of a profession over the past 20 years, as comprehensively summarized by Strasser (2002).

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) and Ergonomics (i.e. labour science) are closely related domains; and while historically OHS studies have for example been embedded in a labour science (at times also labelled ‘labour sciences’) curriculum in European countries, Ergonomics is typically integrated as a subject in an OHS curriculum in Australia. This may be due to a different understanding in Australia, where Ergonomics is perceived as the science of Human- Machine-Interface design, rather than labour science as defined by the International Ergonomics Association. Whether the Ergonomics profession is to be located at the level of the broader

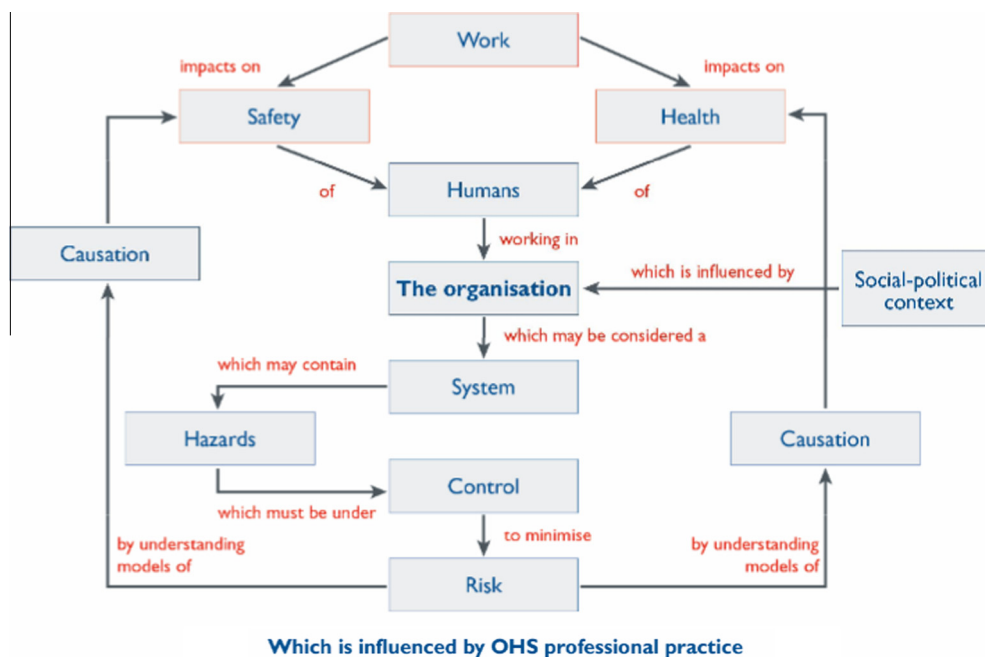


Fig. 1. The conceptual structure of the OHS Body of Knowledge. Source: HaSPA (2012, p.11).

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