



# Introduction

Core Body of Knowledge for the  
Generalist OHS Professional



Safety Institute  
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Australian OHS Education  
Accreditation Board

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The Technical Panel established by the Health and Safety Professionals Alliance (HaSPA) was responsible for developing the conceptual framework of the OHS Body of Knowledge and for selecting contributing authors and peer-reviewers. The Technical Panel comprised representatives from:



**The Safety Institute of Australia** supported the development of the OHS Body of Knowledge and will be providing ongoing support for the dissemination of the OHS Body of Knowledge and for the maintenance and further development of the Body of Knowledge through the Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board which is auspiced by the Safety Institute of Australia.





# Introduction

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**Core Body of  
Knowledge for the  
Generalist OHS  
Professional**

# **Core Body of Knowledge for the Generalist OHS Professional**

## **Introduction**

### **Abstract**

A defined body of knowledge is required as a basis for professional certification and for accreditation of education programs giving entry to a profession. The lack of such a body of knowledge for OHS professionals was identified in reviews of OHS legislation and OHS education in Australia. After a 2009 scoping study, WorkSafe Victoria provided funding to support a national project to develop and implement a core body of knowledge for generalist OHS professionals. The technical aspects of the project were managed by a technical panel with representation from universities and the professional body. An analysis and consultation process was used to develop a conceptual framework. Specialist authors were invited to contribute specific chapters, which then were subjected to peer review and editing. The OHS Body of Knowledge will require updating as people use and interpret it and as the evidence base expands. The outcome provides a basis for accreditation of OHS professional education programs and certification of OHS professionals. It provides guidance for OHS educators in course development, and for OHS professionals and professional bodies in developing continuing professional development activities. Also, OHS regulators, employers and recruiters will find it useful for benchmarking OHS professional practice.

### **Key words**

body of knowledge, professional, certification, accreditation

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## **1 Background to the OHS Body of Knowledge project**

In June 2009 WorkSafe Victoria provided funding of \$390 000 for the development and implementation of a core body of knowledge for generalist Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) professionals. The OHS Body of Knowledge project is owned by the Health and Safety Professionals Alliance (HaSPA), which brings together OHS professional associations and educators, and is sponsored by WorkSafe Victoria. Under HaSPA's guidance, technical aspects of the project were managed by a Technical Panel comprising representatives of La Trobe University, University of Ballarat, RMIT University and the OHS Education Chapter of the Safety Institute of Australia (SIA) and project management and administration were contracted to Enhance Solutions. As HaSPA is not a legal entity, the SIA was the contract holder and responsible for financial governance. Despite being funded in Victoria and managed by a largely Victorian-based Technical Panel, the project has national relevance as a result of extensive input from interested parties around Australia.

The project had two phases: *Development of the Core Body of Knowledge* and *Implementation of the Core Body of Knowledge*. The latter phase included development of course accreditation and professional certification processes. This chapter addresses the background, development process, conceptual framework and intended application of the OHS Body of Knowledge.

### **1.1 Why the project was necessary**

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is not a regulated profession and there are no educational or experience requirements for employment as an OHS advisor/coordinator/manager/consultant (Pryor, 2004, p. 12). Also, there is substantial variation in OHS education provided by universities; this may reflect the specialties of host schools, e.g. health, sciences or engineering, or the interests of key educators within particular programs (Pryor, 2004; Toft et al., 2010). This variation was explored by Toft et al. (2009) in the project *Safeguarding Australians: Mapping the strengths and challenges toward sustainable improvements in OHS education and practice*. HaSPA and others (e.g. Bennett, 2009) have also identified gaps in the coverage of some important OHS topics due largely to the lack of a defined core body of knowledge for generalist OHS professionals.

In his review of Victorian OHS legislation, Maxwell stated that:

This industry may benefit from some form of industry based accreditation scheme, similar to those operating in the accounting field, so that consumers can gain a level of confidence about the consultants that they may engage. (2004).

In response to this recommendation, HaSPA developed a *Victorian Code of Ethics and Minimum Service Standards for Professional Members of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Associations*. These minimum service standards included the requirement for

professional certification of OHS professionals providing independent advice. The resultant certification criteria stipulated completion of an approved education program or some alternative means of establishing that the applicant has the required knowledge, expertise and competencies; demonstrated practical expertise; and a minimum period of full-time practice or its equivalent (HaSPA, 2009). During discussions underpinning the development of the code and standards, members of HaSPA identified the lack of a recognised core body of knowledge informing the education and practice of generalist OHS professionals as not only impacting the quality of advice in the workplace, but also inhibiting the implementation of a professional certification process.

The importance of a defined body of knowledge for a profession is highlighted in the definition of a profession:

A profession is a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as possessing *special knowledge* and skills in a *widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level*, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others [emphasis added] (Professions Australia, 1997).

## 1.2 Scope of the project and some definitions

In developing the project and its methodology, members of the Technical Panel spent some time clarifying the scope of the project and defining key terms. The following questions and answers provide an important base of understanding for anyone reading or applying the OHS Body of Knowledge.

### 1.2.1 Who is the focus of the OHS Body of Knowledge?

This project focuses on the generalist OHS professional, a term developed for this project to clearly differentiate the target role from that of specialist OHS roles, such as occupational ergonomist and occupational hygienist. However, as the project progressed, it became apparent that generalist OHS professional should be considered a specialty role in its own right, similar to the medical specialty of general practice. For the purposes of this project, a generalist OHS professional is defined as *one who applies a multidisciplinary body of knowledge in a unique way to provide enterprises with advice on the organisational arrangements that will lead to the systemic and systematic management of OHS to prevent work-related fatality, injury, disease and ill-health (FIDI). This advice may be given by an internal consultant who is an employee of the business or by an external consultant on a fee-for-service basis.*

This role is differentiated from that of an OHS specialist who applies high-level knowledge and skills from a particular domain/discipline to solve specific problems. Some OHS specialists also may be OHS generalists, but it is not a pre-requisite for working in a specialist field. While the generalist OHS professional may undertake activities related to claims management and return to work, environment and sustainability, or security, these allied fields may be considered bodies

of knowledge in their own right and are not included in the Body of Knowledge for the generalist OHS professional.

In addition, the role and scope of the generalist OHS professional considered here is attuned to the Australian context. While much basic knowledge and skill requirements will be relevant for OHS professionals in any context, varying international operating requirements, legislative frameworks and cultural aspects may significantly impact on approaches to, and applications of, core knowledge and skills.

### 1.2.2 What is the OHS Body of Knowledge?

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 aetiology 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. In defining the Body of Knowledge it is recognised that knowledge is not static. Rather it is subject to continual reinterpretation and evolution as people engage with it, apply it and extend it by conducting research. As experience is an important contributor to knowledge and its application, it should not be assumed that any educational program can address the whole of the core Body of Knowledge for the generalist OHS professional.

### 1.2.3 What is the scope of the OHS Body of Knowledge?

The scope of the OHS Body of Knowledge is restricted to the *core* knowledge with which all generalist OHS professionals would be expected to engage. It is assumed that generalist OHS professionals will have additional areas of knowledge based on their background, education and experience. While the importance of this additional expertise for addressing the spectrum of OHS issues in various industries and environments is acknowledged, the focus of this project is the core knowledge that all generalist OHS professionals should share.

### 1.2.4 Who is the audience for the OHS Body of Knowledge? How will they use it?

The primary target audience for the OHS Body of Knowledge comprises:

- OHS professional bodies that will use it as a basis for course accreditation and professional certification
- OHS educators who will use it to inform development of education programs
- OHS professionals who will use it to guide their professional development.

Also, the Body of Knowledge will be important to regulators, employers and recruiters as a standard for OHS professionals.

### 1.3 Principles underpinning development of the OHS Body of Knowledge

Three groups of principles underpinned development of the Body of Knowledge. The first group of principles related to the project's *rigour*:

- There would be a broad range of inputs in developing the structure and content for the Body of Knowledge, including Australian and international sources, educators and academics, OHS professionals, OHS professional bodies and other interested parties
- The Body of Knowledge would not be based on the opinions of individuals but, wherever possible, be derived from the evidence base reported in peer-reviewed literature
- As the evidence base expands, the Body of Knowledge will be updated to ensure its continued relevance.

The second group of principles related to the *nature* of the Body of Knowledge. The Body of Knowledge was:

- Not a text book
- Not a program of study or a course
- Not a series of dot points.

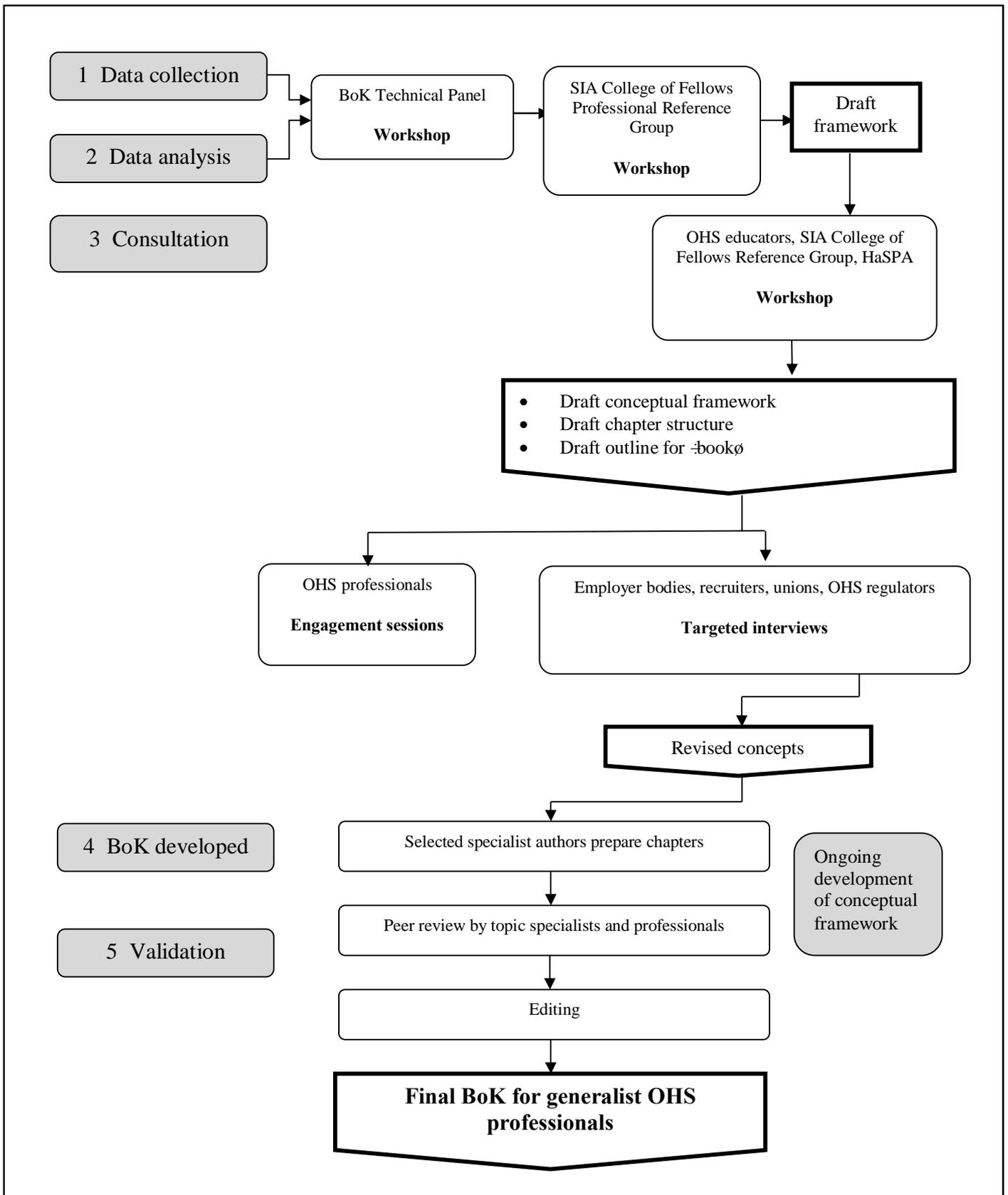
The third group of principles related to *application* of the Body of Knowledge. The Body of Knowledge would:

- Inform OHS education, but not prescribe a curriculum
- Provide a basis for course accreditation and professional certification
- Inform continuing professional development
- Be able to be applied in different contexts and frameworks.

This last application principle relating to different contexts and frameworks is particularly important. It means that the OHS Body of Knowledge focuses on key concepts and core theories, and acknowledges that individual OHS professionals bring their specific industry, organisation and task knowledge to the application of these key concepts and core theories in a particular context. This ability to contextualise key concepts and core theories is the defining characteristic of a professional.

## **2 Process for developing the OHS Body of Knowledge**

The OHS Body of Knowledge project development process is illustrated in Figure 1. Further information about its conceptual framework, and consultation, writing and review/validation processes are provided below.



**Figure 1: Development process for the OHS Body of Knowledge (BoK)**

## 2.1 Conceptual framework

Development of the OHS Body of Knowledge began in 2008 with a series of workshops that resulted in an application by HaSPA for a grant from WorkSafe Victoria to fund the project. In June 2009, the grant was announced and work formally began.

Initial data collection included mapping the programs offered by all Australian universities providing OHS professional education, and reviewing the relevant literature and information provided by Australian and international OHS professional bodies. After analysis of this information by the Technical Panel, several options for defining the framework for the Body of Knowledge were considered. Following a workshop with a specially convened Professional Reference Group from the SIA College of Fellows, these options were reduced to a single proposed framework. This model was tested and further refined at a forum attended by more than 30 OHS educators from 16 Australian universities. The framework was refined further still through the consultation, writing and review processes.

## 2.2 Consultation

Consultation was integral to the development of the OHS Body of Knowledge. Initially data gathered for the project *Safeguarding Australians: Mapping the strengths and challenges to sustainable improvement in OHS education and practice* (Toft et al., 2010) was revisited to glean the opinions of various stakeholders. Subsequently, representatives from the following groups were consulted:

- OHS educators
- OHS professionals
- OHS professional bodies
- Employers, recruiters, unions and OHS regulators.

Also, the input of these and other stakeholders was encouraged via the education discussion forum on the SIA website.

### 2.2.1 OHS educators

Early in the project, consultation with OHS educators was undertaken on the basis that the content of current OHS courses could be viewed as a surrogate for the OHS Body of Knowledge. Course material was examined and a two-day workshop was attended by more than 30 OHS educators.

### 2.2.2 OHS professionals

Face-to-face engagement sessions with generalist OHS professionals were held in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart. While organised by the

SIA, these free half-day sessions were open to all OHS generalists. The sessions were attended by 140 OHS professionals.

### 2.2.3 OHS professional bodies

OHS professional bodies were kept apprised of project developments through their HaSPA representatives, and were invited to nominate peer reviewers.

### 2.2.4 Employers, recruiters, unions, OHS regulators

Targeted interviews were held with representatives of these groups, and they were invited to comment as part of the review process.

## **2.3 Writing**

Having developed the framework and structure for the Body of Knowledge, the Technical Panel identified individuals they considered to be experts in the various OHS areas and invited them to contribute chapters. Writers were not remunerated and all welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the Body of Knowledge. The Technical Panel remains appreciative of the time, commitment and professionalism brought to the task by all contributing authors.

## **2.4 Review**

Initially, chapter drafts were reviewed by the Technical Panel, and suggested changes were made by the authors. The amended drafts were peer reviewed by people considered specialists in the relevant area. The resultant feedback was reviewed and collated by the Technical Panel and provided to the authors; once again, changes were made as necessary. Final drafts were then edited for cohesion and consistency. The Technical Panel is appreciative of the time and professionalism of all involved in the review and validation process.

## **3 Outline of the OHS Body of Knowledge**

Members of the Technical Panel dedicated considerable time to analysing course information and discussing possible frameworks for the OHS Body of Knowledge. For example, did the risk-management process represent an appropriate framework? It was realised that practising OHS professionals do not always apply a risk-management framework, but rather they employ the knowledge and skills that are appropriate for the particular problem or matter at hand, at a particular stage in the problem-solving cycle. Thus the Technical Panel arrived at a conceptual approach where concepts and sub-concepts were defined and described with little structure applied to the relationship between them. The generalist OHS professional should have an understanding of these concepts,<sup>1</sup> their sub-concepts or components, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Concepts are defined by Babbie (Fawcett, 2005, p. 4) as words or phrases that summarise ideas, observations and experiences. She describes concepts as tools that provide mental images that can facilitate communication about and understanding of a phenomenon.

underpinning evidence. However, as concepts are abstract, the OHS professional also needs to organise the concepts into a framework in order to solve a problem. The global and technical concepts that form the basis of the OHS Body of Knowledge are shown in Table 1.

A useful way of visualising this conceptual approach is provided by the pensieve described by J. K. Rowling in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. In Chapter 30, the hero discovers a mysterious bowl in Headmaster Dumbledore's study. The pensieve is a stone basin containing a white gaseous/liquid substance that emits a silvery light. The substance is comprised of Dumbledore's thoughts. When too many thoughts cram his mind, he siphons the excess into the basin and examines them at his leisure. This makes it easier for him to identify patterns and linkages. To apply this analogy to the OHS Body of Knowledge, the basin represents the boundaries of the Body of Knowledge, and Dumbledore's thoughts are analogous to the concepts that underpin OHS and are specific to the domain of the generalist professional. The concepts drift in an unstructured fashion, but within the boundaries of the basin. The links are made naturally by the flow of concepts within the basin, but they are also structured by the OHS professional who looks into the basin, and draws on key ideas relevant to a particular problem or situation. Similarly, OHS educators will make links in developing a curriculum or program of professional education.

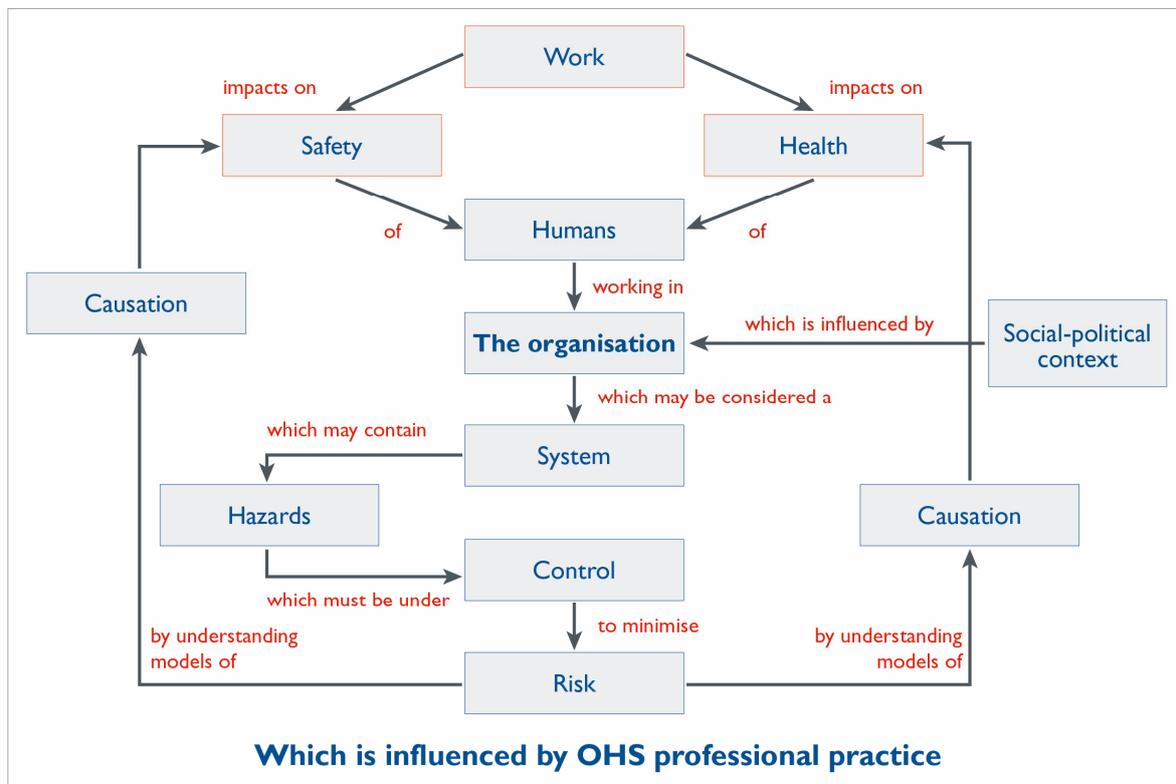
As the development of the OHS Body of Knowledge continued a framework developed that showed the linkages between the concepts in preventing and managing work-related fatality, injury, disease and ill-health. Figure 2 provides a storyline behind the OHS Body of Knowledge:

**Work** impacts on the **safety** and **health** of humans who work in **organisations**. Organisations are influenced by the **socio-political context**. Organisations may be considered a **system** which may contain **hazards** which must be under control to minimise **risk**. This can be achieved by understanding **models causation** for safety and for health which will result in improvement and safety and health of people at work. The OHS professional applies **professional practice** to influence the organisation to being about this improvement.

With reference to key papers, each chapter gives a synoptic overview of a concept, its development and its application to understanding the aetiology and control of work-related fatality, injury, disease and ill-health (FIDI). The Body of Knowledge is not a textbook detailing all that the OHS professional needs to know; rather, it provides a picture of current thinking that highlights key aspects and how that thinking evolved.

**Table 1: Concepts and sub-concepts in the OHS Body of Knowledge**

<b>Global concept: Work</b>	
<b>Global concept: Safety</b>	
<b>Global concept: Health</b>	
<i>Foundation science</i>	<i>for understanding hazards, mechanisms of action and control</i>
<b>Socio-political context</b>	OHS law as regulation in Australia
	Technological and industrial relations climate and business imperatives
<b>Systems</b>	Systems and systems thinking, management systems, systems of work
<b>The organisation</b>	Culture, leadership, organisational change, governance, management, organisational strategy
<b>The Human (individual)</b>	The Human as a biological system
	The Human as a psychological being
	The Human as a social being
<b>Hazards and their mechanisms of action and related controls</b>	Hazard as a concept
	Biomechanical hazards
	Chemical hazards
	Biological hazards
	Psychosocial hazards and occupational stress
	Psychosocial hazards: Fatigue
	Psychosocial hazards: Bullying, aggression and violence
	Physical hazards: Noise and vibration
	Physical hazards: Electricity
	Physical hazards: Ionising radiation
	Physical hazards: Non Ionising radiation
	Physical hazards: Thermal environment
	Physical hazards: Gravitational
	Physical hazards: Plant
	Physical hazards: Mobile plant
Physical hazards: Vehicles and occupational road use	
<b>Risk</b>	Uncertainty, perspectives, tolerance, acceptability, risk perception, exposure, likelihood, consequence, risk assessment/risk estimation
<b>Causation</b>	Models of causation: Safety
	Models of causation: Health determinants
<b>Control</b>	Control: Prevention and intervention
	Mitigation: Health impacts
	Mitigation: Emergency planning
<b>Practice</b>	Model of OHS practice
	The OHS professional as a critical consumer of research



**Figure 2: The conceptual structure of the OHS Body of Knowledge**

#### **4 Application of the OHS Body of Knowledge**

As stated in section 1.2, the primary target audience for the OHS Body of Knowledge comprises OHS professional bodies that will use it as a basis for course accreditation and professional certification; OHS educators who will use it to inform the development of education programs; and OHS professionals who will use it to guide their professional development.

##### **4.1 As a basis for accreditation of OHS professional education programs**

The Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board, auspiced by the Safety Institute of Australia, was established in the implementation phase of the Body of Knowledge project to accredit OHS professional education programs in Australia. A key criterion for accreditation is 'integrated tasks and structured learning experiences addressing the conceptual structure of the OHS Body of Knowledge' (HaSPA, 2010, p. 12). All universities in Australia and overseas are encouraged to seek accreditation for their OHS professional education programs.

While accreditation of OHS education programs is voluntary, completion of an accredited OHS education program is deemed to meet the knowledge requirements for professional certification.

#### **4.2 As a basis for professional certification**

As indicated in section 1.1, an objective of the OHS Body of Knowledge project was to enable certification of OHS professionals; one of the criteria for certification was completion of an approved education program or some alternative means of establishing that the applicant has the required knowledge (HaSPA, 2008). The certification process developed under the implementation phase of the OHS Body of Knowledge project addresses the knowledge criterion for certification by requiring:

• special knowledge as defined in the OHS Body of Knowledge demonstrated by completion of an accredited OHS professional education program. For equity reasons an alternative route for demonstrating knowledge is available via a Challenge Assessment structured around the OHS Body of Knowledge. There are criteria that must be satisfied to access this alternative route. (HaSPA2010, p. 12)

#### **4.3 To inform OHS professional education programs**

As integrated tasks and learning experiences related to the OHS Body of Knowledge represent a key requirement for program accreditation, it is assumed that the OHS Body of Knowledge will have a major impact on OHS professional education. However, the OHS Body of Knowledge is neither a textbook nor a curriculum. The accreditation process recognises that the uniqueness of each institution and program is to be valued and that educational institutions should have maximum flexibility in achieving the required standards. Also, the accreditation process respects the expertise and academic autonomy of institutions providing OHS professional education.

Thus it is expected that OHS educators will refer to the OHS Body of Knowledge as they develop curricula, courses and learning activities, and incorporate Body of Knowledge concepts and sub-concepts as appropriate.

#### **4.4 To inform continuing professional development**

The OHS Body of Knowledge is the core knowledge with which all OHS professionals should be able to engage. This does not mean that all OHS professionals will have the same depth of knowledge for each concept and sub-concept, but they should have some knowledge of all concepts and most sub-concepts as well as an understanding of how that knowledge developed. It is expected that, as part of their continuing professional development, OHS professionals will review the Body of Knowledge and identify gaps in their knowledge and/or areas where they would benefit from increasing the breadth or depth of their knowledge as

relevant to their professional practice. These professional development opportunities can be supported by OHS professional bodies, OHS training providers and conferences.

#### **4.5 Use by other groups**

While the Australian model OHS legislation does not specifically require employment or engagement of suitably qualified OHS advice, it is implied through the requirement for a person in control of a business or undertaking to eliminate risks to health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable; and if it is not reasonably practicable to minimise those risks so far as is reasonably practicable (Safe Work Australia, 2011) (WHS s 18). Evaluation of what is 'reasonably practicable' may well require professional knowledge pertaining to the likelihood of the hazard or risk occurring, the degree of harm that might result, ways of eliminating the hazard or risk, and whether the cost of elimination or minimisation is grossly disproportionate to the risk (WHS s 18)<sup>2</sup>.

As it is likely that OHS regulators and the courts will use the OHS Body of Knowledge to benchmark what is 'reasonably practicable', it would be prudent for employers and recruiters to consider the OHS Body of Knowledge (and professional certification) as a benchmark when selecting OHS professionals. Similarly, organisations engaging the services of an OHS consultant should consider the Body of Knowledge relevant to a particular issue/task with professional certification being a useful selection criterion.

### **5 Updating**

The need for ongoing updating of the OHS Body of Knowledge is acknowledged; the more people engage with it, the more refined it becomes. Also, as stated in section 1.2, knowledge is not static, but evolves through people engaging with it, reinterpreting it and extending it through research. Thus processes and structures will be developed for ongoing updating.

### **6 Summary**

The OHS Body of Knowledge project formally commenced in 2009 with a substantial grant from WorkSafe Victoria. An identified need for certification of OHS professionals dictated the necessity for definition of the required knowledge as a basis for accreditation of OHS education programs and assessment of individuals. The project had two phases – development of the Body of Knowledge followed by its implementation, which included the establishment of course-accreditation and professional-certification processes.

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<sup>2</sup> See OHS *BoK* Socio-Political Context: OHS Law and Regulation in Australia.

The OHS Body of Knowledge defines the core knowledge with which a generalist OHS professional should be able to engage to provide advice on the prevention and minimisation of work-related fatality, injury, disease and ill-health. A broad range of topic specialists contributed to writing the Body of Knowledge, which was reviewed and validated by other topic specialists and OHS professionals. As OHS knowledge evolves as a result of engagement and research, the Body of Knowledge will be updated.

The Body of Knowledge will be used by OHS professional bodies as a basis for accreditation of OHS professional education programs and certification of OHS professionals, by OHS educators to inform development of OHS education programs and by OHS professionals to guide their professional development. The OHS Body of Knowledge is not a textbook or a curriculum of study and, as experience is an important contributor to knowledge, it should not be assumed that any educational program can address the whole of the Body of Knowledge. While it is not expected that all OHS professionals will have depth of knowledge in each concept and sub-concept, it is assumed that they will be able to engage in informed discussion on each concept and sub-concept. The Body of Knowledge (and the resultant certification of OHS professionals) should be a benchmark for engagement of OHS advisors to ensure competent advice on determining what is reasonably practicable in preventing and minimising work-related fatality, injury, disease and ill health.

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