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## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SAFE WORK<sup>43 44</sup>

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***Abstract:** The paper focuses on the way the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the health and safety at work. In a broader sense, parallels are drawn between the ISO 45000 series of standards for occupational health and safety and the relevant UN Sustainable Development Goals. The guidelines of ISO 45005:2020 are subjected to critical analysis in respect to their application in the context of an educational organization.*

***Keywords:** ISO standards, COVID-19, Occupational Health and Safety, UN SDGs.*

***JEL Codes:** J28, J80, L15, K32.*

### INTRODUCTION

The first confirmed COVID-19 case in Bulgaria was registered on 8 March 2020. On 30 March 2020 the Bulgarian Government issued an Ordinance № 55 which aims to protect employees known as the “measure 60:40”. According to the latest Informational Bulletin of the National Social Security Institute of Bulgaria (NSSI, 2021) the COVID-19 related crisis has triggered an increase of unemployment payments with more than 50%. Nevertheless, the short-term character of this measure does not provide sustained solutions for organizations in all economic sectors.

The initial chaotic and contradictory solutions gradually were streamlined by the international community. In a span of just 3 months, between 15 September and 15 December 2020, experts from 26 countries from the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) developed and successfully published the publicly available specification ISO /PAS 45005.

### EXPOSITION

#### **Standards for occupational health and safety**

The chronology of occupational health and safety management systems can be traced back to 1996 when the first edition of the British Standard BS 8800 was published. In 2004 this standard was revised. In 1999, the first specification OHSAS 18001 was published, and later updated in 2007. OHSAS 18002 was issued in 2008 and contained guidance on how to meet the requirements of OHSAS 18001.

In 2013, ISO established a special Technical Committee - ISO/TC 283 “Occupational health and safety management”. It currently is headed by the British Standards Institution and includes 77 participating members (national representatives) and 23 observing members, including the Bulgarian Institute for Standardization (BDS).

In 2018, the first truly international standard with requirements for occupational health and safety management systems with guidance for their use was published by ISO. As of 2021, three

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standards from the so-called ISO 45000 series are published:

- ISO 45001:2018 Occupational health and safety management systems — Requirements with guidance for use;
- ISO 45003:2021 Occupational health and safety management — Psychological health and safety at work — Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks;
- ISO/PAS 45005:2020 Occupational health and safety management — General guidelines for safe working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ISO 45000 series will be completed with three additional standards which are at different stages of readiness:

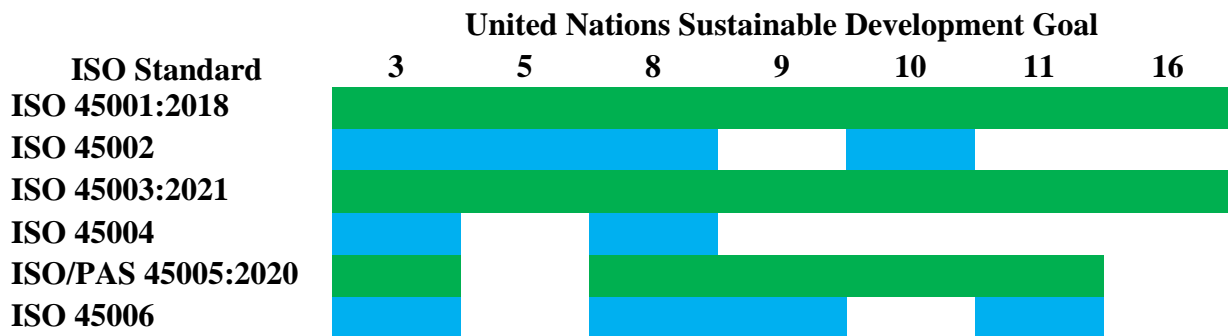
- ISO/DIS 45002 Occupational health and safety management systems — General guidelines for the implementation of ISO 45001:2018;
- ISO/WD 45004 Occupational health and safety management — Guidelines on performance evaluation;
- ISO/WD 45006 Occupational health and safety — Preventing and managing infectious diseases — Guidelines for organizations.

ISO 45002 is due to be published in 2022, and the other two standards- approximately in 2024. The last standard will likely create a set with the COVID-19 related ISO/PAS 45005.

### ISO standards and UN Sustainable Development Goals

In march 2018- the same month when ISO published the first edition of ISO 45001, it also created a special brochure that highlights its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (ISO, 2018; UN, 2018). Table 1 displays the relationship of the ISO 45000 series of standards with some of the 17 UN SDGs.

Table 1. ISO 45000 series of standards and the UN Sustainable Development Goals



As shown in Table 1, all of the standards for occupational health and safety management focus on SDG 3 “Good Health and Well-being” and on SDG 8 “Decent Work and Economic Growth”. They are closely followed by SDG 9 “Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure”, SDG 10 “Reduced Inequalities” and SDG 11 “Sustainable Cities and Communities”. Less relevance is demonstrated for SDG 5 “Gender Equality” and SDG 16 “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions”.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacts the SDG 3 and SDG 8, their targets and indicators as follows:

- *Target 3.3: Fight communicable diseases:* By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases;
- *Target 3.8: Achieve universal health coverage:* Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.

- *Target 3.b: Support research, development and universal access to affordable vaccines and medicines:* Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries, provide access to affordable essential medicines and vaccines.
  - *SDG INDICATOR 3.B.1 Vaccine coverage:* Indicator 3.B.1 is the proportion of the target population covered by all vaccines included in their national programme. *Goal:* By 2030 provide access to affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.
- *Target 8.8: Protect labour rights and promote safe working environments:* Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment.
  - *SDG INDICATOR 8.8.1 Occupational injuries:* the frequency rates of fatal and non-fatal occupational injuries, by sex and migrant status;
  - *SDG INDICATOR 8.8.2 Compliance of labour rights:* the Level of national compliance with labour right (freedom of association and collective bargaining) based on International Labour Organization (ILO) textual sources and national legislation.

### Integration of ISO/PAS 45005 in the management system of an organization

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all aspects of life and business has stimulated organizations worldwide to look for best practices and to adapt them to local context. Figure 1 presents a model that can be applied when integrating anti-COVID measures in an educational organization. This involves the core requirements for quality management system (ISO 9001) augmented with the guidance for educational organizations (ISO 21001) and the standards for occupational health and safety (ISO 45000 series).

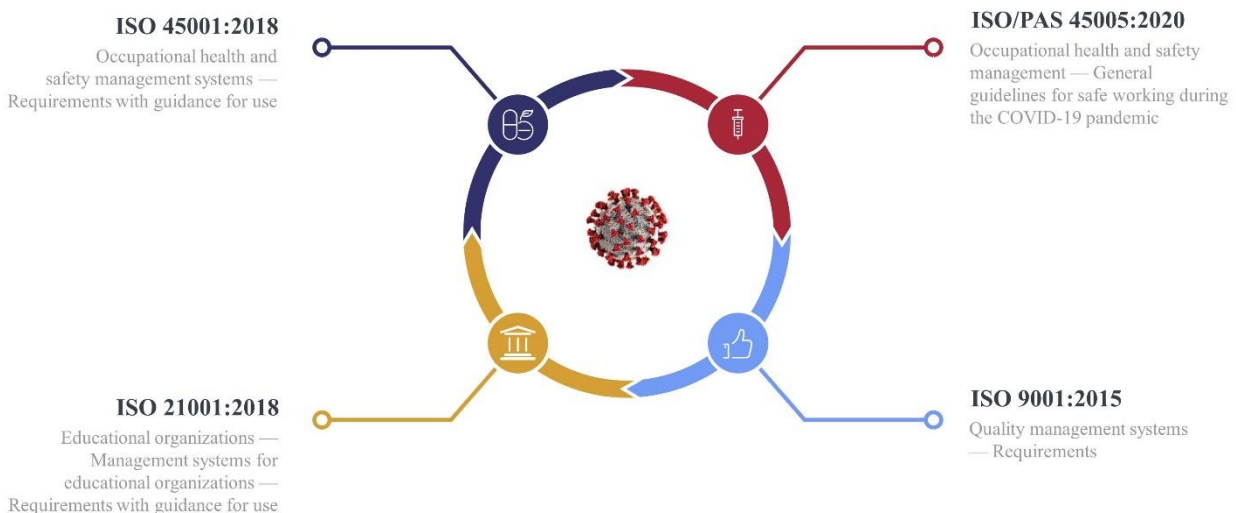


Fig. 1. International standards to be integrated in an educational organization to combat COVID-19

To some extent this integration is facilitated by the common high-level structure of ISO management system standards known as Annex SL to the ISO Directives. In fact, the content of ISO 9001 and ISO 21001 follow the 10-clause framework of Annex SL and their interdependence is not hard to be understood by an experienced professional in the field of management systems.

ISO 45001 proposes more substantial additions in respect to health and safety at work. Clauses 5, 6, 7 and 8 offer important insights into the practical implementation of the UN sustainable development goals, targets and indicators (Elka Vasileva, 2020). The list below

enumerates only some of the concrete requirements for occupational health and safety that any organization must comply with:

- Consultation and participation of workers;
- Hazard identification and assessment of risks and opportunities;
- Determination of legal requirements and other requirements;
- Planning action;
- Eliminating hazards and reducing occupational health and safety risks;
- Emergency preparedness and response.

One would normally expect that the integration of ISO/PAS 45005 with the already existing ISO 45001-based management system will be effortless and much easier than the consideration of quality and educational requirements. This is clearly not the case, since ISO/PAS 45005 does not respect the 10 clauses of Annex SL, and in this sense also those of ISO 45001. The authors of this paper have created a matrix of correspondence which serves as “a key to unlocking the treasure”.

### **Implementation of ISO/PAS 45005 in the context of an educational organization**

The measures proposed below are derived from the general guidelines for safe working during the COVID-19 pandemic, contained in ISO/PAS 45005:2020.

#### *Workplaces*

The standard defines that all “workplaces and facilities within those workplaces are clean and safe to use”. Similar to other organizations, the University of Ruse has developed schedules for cleaning, disinfecting and preserving the state of cleanliness by following strict instructions and maintaining records “who did what and when”. In addition, special signs, wall and floor markings indicate the expected behaviour and movement of people on the campus of the university. People who are external to the University of Ruse such as visitors, alumni and citizens are also instructed and required to follow identical rules.

Whenever required by the government and/or whenever possible and permitted, teaching staff and administration perform their duties by working from home. This is a good solution when the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases increases dramatically and/or when someone on staff or their family member is quarantined. The work performed from home is justified and recorded in a specific form which is submitted to the relevant management on a weekly basis.

ISO/PAS 45005:2020 also provides guidelines for “working in other people’s homes”, and for “working in multiple locations or mobile workplaces” which are especially relevant for drivers, maintenance staff, cleaners, etc.

#### *Activities*

In order to “reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 between workers and through interaction with other people in the workplace” the Rector of the university issues orders and additional regulations. In severe COVID-19 conditions work is done using remote communication tools and environments. When risk is moderate, the use of disinfection, body temperature control and wearing of face masks are some of the main measures taken. In addition, lectures are done online and only the practical and laboratory exercises are done in small groups while maintaining the required distance. When risk is low, operations resume their normal, face-to-face form. The use of the recently introduced “green certificate” can be considered as a tool to promote full-scale activities while at the same time considering the possibility of getting infected.

ISO/PAS 45005:2020 gives additional guidelines for “emergency preparedness and response” and for “planning for changes to restrictions” in order to maintain the core activities.

A unique feature of this standard is Clause 5 “*Suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19*”. It should be carefully studied and rigidly implemented within the university. This requires the following sequence risk mitigation of measures:

- Preventing entry of people with COVID-19 symptoms, people from the so-called “red zones”, or contact persons to confirmed cases;
- Providing suitable personal protective equipment (face masks, face shields, gloves);
- Notification of all relevant interested parties of identified and confirmed COVID-19 cases and maintaining a register of their contacts;
- Providing isolation spaces for people with symptoms and/or medical personnel and first aid responders;
- Managing illness of workers at home or in mobile settings;
- Testing, contact tracing and quarantine.

The COVID-19 pandemic can have severe negative effect on people’s *psychological health and well-being*. ISO/PAS 45005:2020 provides a lengthy and still not exhaustive list of psychological hazards: uncertainly, workload and work sequence, working hours, role ambiguity, lack of control, lack of social support, impacts of prolonged isolation and remote working, job insecurity, difficulty in balancing work and home life, specific roles that are higher risk due to frequent, close or prolonged interaction with other people, and worker’s specific circumstances.

To counter the abovementioned risks, in its Clause 7 “*Inclusivity*” suggests to

- respect the feeling of insecurity and anxiety of employees and to do as much as possible to calm them down (Kostadinova I., S. Ahmedova, 2019);
- let people work from home when this does not affect their overall performance;
- adapt roles and activities in order to reduce risks;
- ensure reliable communication between all interested parties and affected people.

*Communication* (Clause 9), be it formal or informal, should cover

- General safety measures;
- Updated working instructions and indicators;
- How to return to the workplace after absence related to COVID-19 quarantine;
- How to maintain hygiene at work;
- What is the correct use of personal protective equipment, masks and face coverings.

The modified way of performing *operations* in COVID-19 environment is presented in detail in Clause 12 of ISO/PAS 45005:2020. Starting with the affirmation that “No worker should be obliged to work in an unsafe work environment.” the standard then continues with workplace logistics (travel to and from work, moving around and between workplaces, work zones and workstations), the use of common areas, meetings and visits to the workplace, working with the public, work-related travel, and deliveries.

## CONCLUSION

The impact of COVID-19 on safe work is a sensible and pressing topic. Data shows that in addition to the monetary dimension, this problem has significant and far-reaching consequences on people’s physical and psychological health.

The integrated approach presented in this paper provides a multilateral view of the solutions to the problem. The intent is to initially present the “big picture” by starting from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and their correspondence to ISO standards. Then to focus on the best practices, opportunities and tools that organizations have at their disposal.

The available guidelines of ISO/PAS 45005:2020 are presented from the perspective of an educational organization and how some of them are practically applied in the context of the University of Ruse.

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