

2022 Update

We have recently become aware that there are no commercially available RCD test sets on the market that are compatible with the output of a Safe Supply Unit (SSU). Therefore, unless the installer already has a suitable test set, it will not be possible to complete the normal range of RCD related tests at the time of installation or when carrying out periodic testing.

FAQ – Safe Supply units

Q. Why should I install a Safe Supply Unit (SSU) in a school science laboratory?

A. School science laboratories are a high risk area regarding electrical shock risk. There is a potentially dangerous combination of mains voltage, water and school children. Traditional protection methods, such as the creation of earth free areas, are impractical to maintain given the transitory nature of electrical experiments in school laboratories. Furthermore, the physiological effects of electrical current on school children are more severe than on healthy adults and the comparatively coarse protection provided by a 30mA RCD is not considered by many to be adequate.

Q. What is the output configuration of an SSU and what protection is provided?

A. The unit contains an isolating transformer, typically with a one-to-one transformation ratio of 230:230V. The secondary winding is centre tapped to earth resulting in 115V on L1 and 115V on L2. The centre tap is referenced to earth via a 12kΩ current-limiting / safety resistor. The output is protected by a high sensitivity earth leakage relay, either set at 1.25mA or 5mA.

Q. What are the benefits of this arrangement?

A. The shock risk is reduced from 230V to 115V by the centre-tapped configuration. The maximum fault current that can flow is limited to less than 10mA by the current limiting / safety resistor at all times. Earth faults will be quickly removed by the tripping of the earth leakage device. This is the safest arrangement for the protection of school children who may come into contact with electricity in a laboratory environment. It should be noted that even this tight protection arrangement does not protect against line-to-line faults or shocks.

Q. Where does this arrangement come from?

A. The arrangement has been in use since the 1960s but was first formalised by the HSE in their publication GS23, "Electrical Safety in Schools", originally issued in 1983. Although no longer published, the HSE have made it clear that they still regard its advice as valid.

Q. Are standard BS1363 13A sockets used with this arrangement?

A. Yes, conventional 13A unswitched sockets have generally been used with standard Safe Supply Units incorporating a centre-tapped winding, a current limiting resistor and a high sensitivity RCD. When switched 13A sockets are required, because the centre-tapped supply arrangement creates a voltage on what is usually the neutral connection, double pole switched sockets should be used.

Q. Can SSUs incorporate an emergency stop facility for the laboratory?

A. SSUs can incorporate a facility to be connected to a normally closed emergency stop system within the laboratory, in accordance with BS7671 clause 537.4.2.3. Key operated switches can also be incorporated to prevent unauthorised use.

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Q. Does the incorporation of Safe Supply Units (SSUs) cause any complications for installers or designers of laboratory installations?

A1. Like all transformers, an inrush current may be experienced when the transformer winding is energised. Type 'D' MCBs of appropriate ratings must be used to supply SSUs.

A2. Transformers generate heat when energised and used, so SSUs should be installed in well ventilated positions to prevent excessive heat build-up. They should not be installed in small cupboards which limit the airflow around them.

A3. No special earthing arrangements are required when connecting the output circuits. The outgoing earth connections can be taken to the earth stud within the unit in the normal way.

A4. The transformer is provided with multiple primary taps at 230V, 240V, 250V and 260V. The tapping that most closely reflects the typical supply voltage should be selected.

A5. Transformers all exhibit regulation, whereby the output voltage will be higher when the transformer is lightly loaded. The output voltage can rise above 230V by up to 5% if there is very little applied load. This overvoltage could be made worse by use of the incorrect primary tap.

A6. Standard plug-in socket testers may show problems such as neutral / polarity faults or earth faults. This is normal and cannot be avoided.

A7. Standard RCD test sets may not operate correctly when connected to the output of an SSU, due to the extra high sensitivity and the lower voltage to earth.

A8. Where possible, SSUs should be limited to supplying sockets feeding plug-in equipment in laboratories. Fixed equipment, such as water heaters, can overload the SSU causing the overcurrent protection to operate.

Q. Does the arrangement cause any complications for end users?

A1. Nuisance tripping can be experienced if equipment is used that has circuitry connected to earth. For example, some traditional computers have filters connected to earth and these will have a small standing leakage. It might be necessary to limit the number of computers connected to any one SSU and to use SSUs with a 5mA sensitivity and not a 1.25mA sensitivity. Due to the current limiting resistor fitted between the CT and E connection of the transformer, the coarsest permitted sensitivity for SSUs is 5mA.

A2. Turning off an item of equipment by means of a single pole switch built into a 13A socket or appliance will not result in removal of all power from the equipment. Therefore "Mains On" indicators may not truly represent the power feed to the equipment.

A3. On installations where emergency stop buttons work in conjunction with the remote trip facility within an SSU, activated buttons usually have to be manually reset after operation. If they are not reset, the main MCB/RCD assembly within the SSU cannot be closed / switched on. MCBs with an Under Volt Release are used on remote trip circuits. These incorporate a red flag to indicate when the UVR has caused the MCB to operate.

Q. Do Safe Supply Units (SSUs) require any special routine / periodic testing?

A. We recommend that the correct operation of earth leakage sensor / RCD is tested quarterly by pressing the 'test' button on the front of the unit. The earth leakage sensor / RCD should switch off the supply and should then be switched on to restore the supply. We also strongly recommend that the integrity of the 12kΩ current limiting / safety resistor is checked annually. The current limiting / safety resistor should not be removed under any circumstances, even for testing purposes. If the earth leakage sensor / RCD does not switch off the supply when the 'test' button is pressed, or if the integrity of the current limiting / safety resistor is compromised, seek expert advice.

Typical SSU wiring diagram

