

# Student Sex Worker Research

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# Foreword

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# Foreword

At NUS, we believe the liberation of a marginalised group of people should be led and shaped by the voices of the people who identify within that group. This is the method that we have applied over the past few years in the development of our political stance on sex work and student sex workers.

As a national movement, we've passed policy to ensure that sex worker led organisations inform the education sector about how we improve access to education and welfare services for sex workers. It is why this research on the experience of student sex workers in the UK is the result of a collaboration between NUS, the Sex Worker Open University and English Collective of Prostitutes.

We believe all students have the right to bodily autonomy and recognise our duty to campaign against stigmatisation and criminalisation of sex work. Stigma prevents student sex workers seeking help from their students' union, their intuitions, their family and friends, public health and survivor support services when they require them. We know that even though buying, soliciting, arranging and organising sex work is illegal, it does not stop sex work from happening, but only pushes it further underground, entrapping students in poverty and isolation.

The cost to live and study in the UK makes sex work as much a student issue as poverty, labour rights and the welfare state. As long as students use sex work to fund their further or higher education, whether it be their tuition fees or their day to day living costs, we as a national union, should stand up to defend and extend their rights.

## **Susuana Amoah**

NUS National Women's Officer

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# Introduction

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# Introduction

In February 2016 the Women's Campaign and the LGBT+ campaign, working with the Sex Workers Open University (SWOU) and the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) launched a [survey](#) to gather information on the lives and experiences of student sex workers. The survey was open for one month- between February to March 2016 and was promoted via online networks of the LGBT+ and Women's campaign. We received 55 valid responses from students who have been involved in sex work at some point during their time in further or higher education. The research will be followed by more detailed qualitative analysis of the particular experiences of women and LGBT+ student sex workers.

In December 2014 NUS passed a motion to support decriminalisation of sex work so that sex workers can have access to full labour rights, including the right to unionize. NUS believes the decriminalisation of sex work will provide a range of protections for sex workers against labour exploitation, discrimination and violence.

The research draws upon and adds to the findings and recommendations of [The Student Sex Worker Project](#) (TSSWP) which reported that at least 5% of students who made up the research sample were or had been involved in the sex industry. The survey also asks a number of different questions to the TSSWP survey, including asking student sex workers about their understanding and views on the law surrounding sex work and their awareness of their rights. The research was also targeted at LGBT+ and women student sex workers to gather their particular views and experiences. The survey was split into 5 different sections:

- The reasons why students engage in sex work
- The working environment of the sex industry
- What rights student sex workers are aware of
- What opinions student sex workers have on legislation surrounding sex work
- How students' unions and institutions can better support student sex workers.

We defined sex work as an activity that exchanges sex services, performances, or products for material compensation. There were a range of different types of sex work listed in the survey, including sex work that involves working directly with clients or indirect sex work, for example through selling sex services online. All respondents were given access to our [definition of sex work](#) and the types of sex work identified in the survey. They also had access to information on the law and sex work in the UK and the legal systems regulating sex work in different countries.

## Key findings

- Over half of respondents (67%) said they were motivated to work in the sex industry to pay for their living expenses (food, bills etc.) This was followed by paying the rent (53%) and to fund consumption such as clothes and books (51%).
- 35% said that their sex work was used to pay for leisure activity and 35% said it was to pay for their university fees. Around a quarter (26%) said it was to reduce debt at the end of their course or to avoid getting into debt.

- 33% of respondents also said they engaged in sex work because the hours suited their studies. 31% said they were motivated to do sex work because they thought they would enjoy the work, 27% said they were curious about working in the industry and 22% thought it would improve their confidence of self-esteem.
- 46% of respondents said that barriers to leaving included lack of jobs that pay enough. 44% said that mental health issues were a key reason preventing them from leaving the sex industry and finding work in another field.
- 60% of respondents felt safe 'very often' or 'always' while at work.
- 65% said that they had faced harassment of any kind while at work and 58% had experienced sexual harassment while at work. Just under half (47%) had also experienced sexual assault at work and around a third had also experienced physical assault (30%).
- 82% of respondents had never contacted the police about a crime involving their work. Almost half (48%) of respondents said they would feel very uncomfortable at going to the police if they had experienced property theft, violence and sexual violence at the hands of clients and/or management.
- 75% of respondents said that they would support the decriminalisation of sex work, followed by legalisation (27%). Just 18% supported the criminalisation of clients paying for sex.
- Almost three quarters of respondents (73%) had told close friends about their sex work. Fewer respondents had disclosed to anyone else: less than half had disclosed to their partner (47%), just over a third (33%) to healthcare providers, student or private counselling services or to casual friends/ acquaintances.
- Less than 15% of respondents thought their institution or students' union was providing sufficient support. Services student sex workers were most likely to use or consider using were sexual health, counselling and mental health services.
- 64% of respondents said that they would be 'somewhat likely' or 'very likely' to want more information/ advice on mental health issues, followed by information on sexual health (53%), financial help (51%); mutual support from others in the industry (44%) and the impact of sex work on coping with academic study (44%).
- Around 70% of respondents (67%) said that they would prefer to access support services relating to their sex work online via information on a website.

## Profile of respondents

Overall, 55 respondents took part in the research. The majority of respondents were aged between 20-25 years old in higher education. The sample was also mainly white UK students and LGBT+. This provides a valuable insight into the experiences of student sex workers who do not define as straight. The full breakdown of the profile of respondents is outlined below.

**Age:** The majority of respondents were aged between 20-25 years old (57%). 20% were aged between 26-35 and 15% were aged between 16-19 years old. 4% were aged 46-50 and 4% 51+.

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**Gender identity:** The majority of the sample defined their gender identity as woman (71%), 11% identified as Man and 18% of the sample defined 'in another way,' including identifying as genderqueer, non-binary and gender fluid. The vast majority (80%) said that their gender identity was the same as the gender they were originally assigned at birth, 16% responded no, and 4% preferred not to say.

**Sexual orientation/ preference:** A third the respondents defined as bisexual or bi (29%). 24% were either heterosexual/ straight and 24% defined as queer. 22% of the sample described their sexual orientation as gay/ lesbian. One person defined in another away.

**Nationality:** The majority of respondents (84%) were UK citizens studying in the UK. A very small number of respondents were international students from within the EU (7%) or outside of the EU studying in the UK (7%). 2% preferred not to say.

**Ethnicity:** Over half of the respondents described themselves as 'white- English/ Scottish/ Welsh/ Northern Irish/ British' (67%), followed by white – any other background (18%). 7 respondents (14% of the overall sample) said that their ethnic group was non-white. Within this group, respondents were from Black African, Asian and mixed multiple ethnic backgrounds.

**Disability:** Over half (55%) of the sample considered themselves to have a specific learning disability, other disability, impairment or long-term health condition. The highest number of respondents described disability was mental health difficulties (55%), followed by 'no known disability, impairment or long term health condition' (27%), learning difficulty (26%), and an unseen disability or health condition (20%). (15%) also said that they had autistic spectrum disorder and 7% said that they had a physical impairment.

**Level of study:** The majority of respondents (60%) were doing a BA/BSc/ Bed/ Foundation Degree subject. 15% were doing an MA or other types of postgraduate study. 9% said they were doing A/ AS- levels or equivalent level 3 qualifications. Fewer numbers (less than 8%) said they had either graduated, or were doing level 2 or level 1 qualifications.

**Financial support:** Most participants who described the types of financial support they received said that they received student loans for living costs. A significant minority (42%) also said that they received a maintenance grant. Over a quarter (26%) also received Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and 10% an institutional bursary or scholarship. Almost a quarter said they received none of the financial support described above (23%). The majority did not get any financial or other support from their family (58%) and around a third said that they did (31%).



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# Research Findings

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# Research Findings<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Entry in and out of the sex industry

The survey asked students what sex work they had engaged in during their time at university, including - both direct and indirect sex work (see our definition above). Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response to indicate the range of sex work (direct and indirect) they did. The majority of respondents reported that they had been involved in full-service sex work and/or escorting (75%), while the second biggest category was selling sexual services on the internet or on webcam (47%). 20% of the sample said that they had either sold sexual services on the phone or were a sugar baby. Smaller numbers had worked in other areas including being a professional dominatrix, submissive or switch (18%), working in the porn industry (11%), erotic dancing (9%) or doing erotic massages (7%). 5% of respondents had done glamour modelling and 2% had either done peep shows or had been a naked butler. The overall numbers show more responses were given for indirect sex work rather than direct. 51 responses were received for direct sex work (full-service sex work/escorting or dominatrix, submissive or switch work), making 42.5% of the total number of responses, compared to 67 responses for indirect sex work or 55.8% of the sample.

There were a range of ways the respondents had got involved in sex work. The majority of respondents (71%) said that they entered the sex industry by individual choice. A small number (16%) had said they had been suggested the profession by a friend or acquaintance or ticked 'other'. 13% respondents said they had been requested by potential clients through dating apps, the internet or in person. Worryingly, 8 respondents (14%) said that they were coerced or pressured by someone else. Coercion was also mentioned in some of the comments made under 'other.'

With regards to motivations for entering the sex industry, over half of respondents (67%) described how they had entered the sex industry in order to pay for their living expenses (food, bills etc). This was followed by paying the rent (53%) and to fund consumption such as clothes and books (51%). 35% said that their sex work was used to pay for leisure activity or to pay for their university fees and around a quarter (26%) said it was to reduce debt at the end of their course or to avoid getting into debt.

Despite financial concerns being a significant motivation for many respondents entering the sex industry, there was also evidence of other motivations for engaging in sex work. 33% said that the hours suited their studies; 31% said they thought they would enjoy the work, 27% said they were curious about working in the industry and 22% thought it would improve their confidence of self-esteem. 9% also said they thought they would get sexual pleasure from their work.

When asked what the reasons were for *staying* in the sex industry, the findings similarly showed finance as key factor. 67% said that they continued to work in the sex industry because they 'need the money' and 53% said that it was good money. Over half (58%) also said that they stayed because of the flexible hours- indicating that the sex work can both pay well and do so in a way that easily complements a students' lifestyle. Other reasons given by respondents ranged from having a mental and/or physical disability (35%), being unable to find alternative employment (33%) or finding it difficult to do a mainstream job (27%). 27% also said that they stayed because they enjoyed the job.

A mixed picture was found when respondents were asked about their plans for the future. 35% reported that they will 'opt in and out of sex industry as an additional source of income for the

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remainder of their life.’ However, similar numbers, 33%, also said that they want to stop working in the sex industry as soon as they can. 28% also reported that they will continue in the sex industry until they are able to secure employment in their preferred profession/ industry. This suggests more people in the sample wanted to leave the sex industry when the time was right, rather than continue, even sporadically, once they have left further or higher education.

46% of respondents said that barriers to leaving sex work included lack of jobs that pay enough, or a lack of jobs with flexible hours (30%). For instance one respondent wrote:

*‘I prefer being my own boss. I love being able to decide which days and times I take booking and its ideal for working around my studies.... The flexibility is wonderful.’*

Mental health issues were also stated by a significant number of respondents (44%) for being a key reason preventing them from leaving the sex industry and finding work in another field. For a few respondents, issues of coercion and exploitative relationships were a barrier for them leaving the industry.

## 2. Working environment

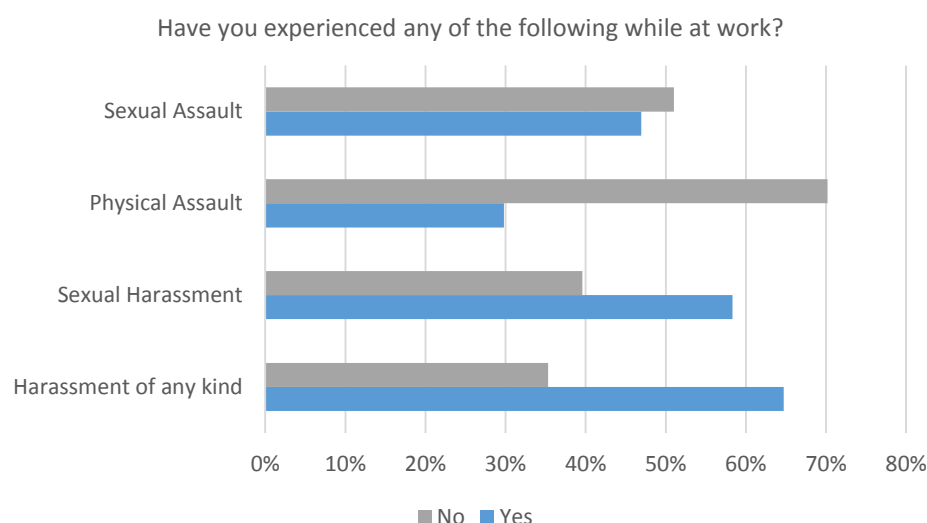
Students were asked about their experiences of their working environment, including how safe they felt at work and whether they had experienced harassment and assault at work or in their personal life as a result of their sex work. The survey also asked how respondents dealt with any potential harassment and/or assault they had faced.

The working environment for most respondents was based at the client’s home (66%) followed by outcalls to hotels (60%). This reflects the proportion of the sample who said they did full-service sex work/ escorting work. Almost half worked in their own home (47%) and around a third (28%) worked in an indoor establishment such as a parlour, brothel or sauna. Around one in 5 (17%) worked on the street/ outdoors.

When asked how often respondents felt safe while at work – the most common response was ‘very often’ (43%). 17% of respondents said ‘always’ and 17% ‘sometimes.’ 15% said that they rarely felt safe and 9% said that they ‘never’ felt safe while working.

While the majority of respondents felt safe very often or always (60% in total), a significant proportion of respondents reported they had experienced harassment while at work. 65% said that they had faced harassment of any kind and 58% had experienced sexual harassment while at work. Just under half (47%) had also experienced sexual assault at work and around a third had also experienced physical assault (30%). For those who worked outdoor or on the street, higher rates of harassment and assault in the workplace were reported. For instance, 78% had experienced sexual harassment (no. 7), 67% sexual assault (no.6) and 44% (no.4) physical assault.

Figure 1: Harassment and assault in the workplace



Out of those who had experienced harassment and/or assault, the vast majority, 80%, had experienced this at work on more than one occasion. Paying clients were most often identified as the person responsible for the harassment or assault (74%) followed by a non-client at their place of work (36%), a stranger (33%) and then a manager or agent (21%).

Respondents were also asked about whether they had faced discrimination, harassment or assault from *outside of work* as a result of their engagement in the sex industry (such as from a neighbour, partner or family member). The majority of respondents said they had not (56%) but a significant minority said yes (43%). Most of respondents reported that they had faced this behaviour from friends (see figure 2). This reflects the level of stigma still attached to much of the activity associated with sex work.

Figure 2: Discrimination faced by student sex workers outside of work

Who have you faced discrimination from? <sup>2</sup>	
Who?	No. of responses
Friends	11
Family	7
Partners (current/ previous)	5
Student	2
Employers/ co-workers	2
University	1
Acquaintances	1

Respondents were also asked to describe how they dealt with the harassment and/ or assault they faced at work and outside. The answers received can be broken down in figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3: Responses to harassment and assault faced at work

How have you dealt with any harassment and/ or assault you have faced at work?	
Action	No. of people
Blocked client in some way	10
Nothing	7
Reported to management	2
Accessed services (counselling, sex worker networks)	2
Reported to NUM	1
Reported to the police	1
Left bad references	1

Figure 4: Responses to harassment and assault faced outside of work

How have you dealt with any discrimination, harassment and / or assault you have faced <u>outside</u> of work?	
Action	No. of people
Ignored it	6
Cut person out of life	2
Nothing	2
Talked to others about the harassment/ assault	2
Stayed with 'supportive' friends	1
'Be more careful about who I speak to'	1
Tried to keep work secret	1

Common to both responses were comments that nothing could be done in the face of abusive and unlawful behaviour. For some student sex workers who had faced harassment and assault at work, they clearly felt there was no other option to report and/or get support:

*'Nothing, what could I do? I'm not going to lie here and pretend I have the power in these situations'*

*'I didn't do anything for fear of repercussions'*

*'I haven't, I never told anyone out of stigma/ no service to go to'*

*'Verbal harassment [...] I do not have time to report, and it will never result in prosecution'*

Responses for how sex workers responded to harassment and/ or assault varied according to type of sex work they were engaged in. For instance, respondents working online talked about being able to block clients from a group/ webcam room or reporting the incident to the website owner

(although this was seen to be ineffective by one respondent who wrote 'nothing ever gets done.')

For those engaged more directly with clients however, blocking contact with an individual may be more difficult. Some respondents talked about blocking contact numbers from phones and 'blacklisting' clients. When management was mentioned, support was seen to be variable:

'On the first occasion I informed the management and they permanently banned the customer from the club. On the second occasion (in a different club) I spent approximately three hours arguing on and off with the management to even get them to remove the customer who assaulted me.'

Similarly, for those who faced harassment outside of work, respondents described how they had limited means to combat this behaviour.

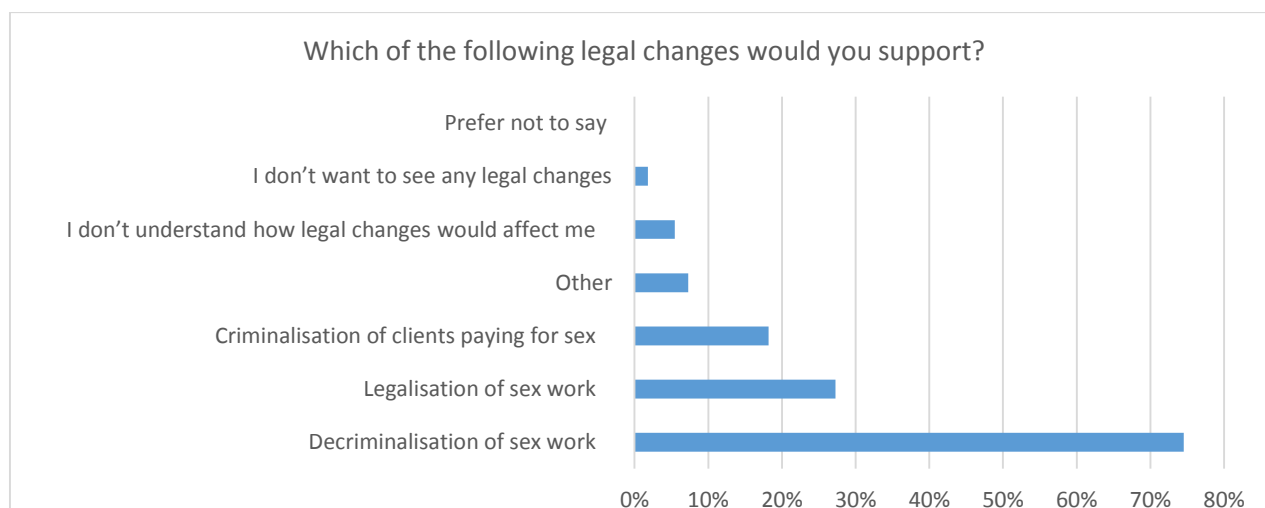
### 3. The law and the police

In England and Wales sex work is not in itself illegal - but a number of laws criminalise activities around it. Under the Sexual Offences Act 2003<sup>3</sup>, it is an offence to cause or incite 'full-service sex work' or control it for personal gain. The 1956 Sexual Offences Act<sup>4</sup> bans running a brothel and it's against the law to loiter or solicit sex on the street. Kerb-crawling is also banned, providing it can be shown the individual was causing a persistent annoyance. The laws are different in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, paying for sex has recently been criminalised<sup>5</sup>.

The survey asked student sex workers what they knew about the legal status of their work and what legal changes they would support. They were also asked about their encounters with the police and their perceptions and experiences with the police. The results showed just over half of respondents said that they fully understood the legal status of their work (52%) and a third had some understanding of the legal status of their work (33%). Only 13% said they were unsure about the legal status of their work and 2% that they did not understand the legal status of their work.

When asked about what legal changes they would support- a significant majority said that they would support the decriminalisation of sex work (75%), followed by legalisation (27%) and criminalisation of clients paying for sex (18%) (see figure 5).

Figure 5: Attitudes on the law and sex work



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Most respondents reported that they did not encounter police during the course of their work. 78% said they had never encountered the police when working, 15% said they had occasionally encountered the police and only 2% frequently. More student sex workers who had interacted with the police reported negative experiences. In the comments left there were a range of responses around police threatening to arrest them. One respondent wrote that they had 'no wish to report to police because of stigma,' indicating a lack of trust between sex workers and the police.

Respondents also said they were reluctant to go to the police if they had experienced a crime whilst working in the sex industry. 48% of respondents said they would feel very uncomfortable at going to the police if they had experienced property theft, violence and sexual violence at the hands of clients and /or management. The vast majority of respondents (82%) had also never contacted the police about a crime involving their work.

Nevertheless for those sex workers who had reported an incident to the police (no.7), 57% (no.4) reported the police had demonstrated professionalism and had showed concern with their safety. Most respondents 58% (no. 4) also agreed or strongly agreed that the officer made them feel comfortable and treated them with respect the last time they had reported an incident<sup>6</sup>. There was more of a mixed response in relation to the question about how far respondents agreed the officer had helped them resolve their situation – 43% (no.3) both strongly disagreed and agreed.

## 4. Disclosure and Support

The survey asked respondents a number of questions around who they had disclosed to and what support they had accessed or would consider using. We also asked questions around how helpful student sex workers found the support on offer at their students' union and institution and what, if any, further information and advice they would like to have access to.

The results showed a high proportion of sex workers who had disclosed to close friends (73%). Fewer respondents had disclosed to anyone else: less than half had disclosed to their partner (47%), just over a third (33%) to healthcare providers, student or private counselling services or to casual friends/ acquaintances. Only 8% had disclosed to staff or officers at their students' union and a slightly higher figure (12%) had disclosed to their personal tutor. Two respondents said they had disclosed to no-one.

There were a range of support services that student sex workers had used or would consider using at their institution and/ or at their students' union. The most popular service that student sex workers had used were sexual health services (29% no. 15), followed by disability services (29% no. 12) counselling (26%. no.13) and support from their union (no.11) (figure 6). However, overall, service use was low amongst respondents.

A higher proportion of respondents said they would *consider* using services. Counselling and sexual health services were the most likely services student sex workers said they would consider using, similar to the results for the services that respondents said they had used. A larger proportion of respondents said they would consider using security services (47%) compared to those who had actually said they had used them (less than 7%). The comparatively higher number of students who reported to have used disability services was not seen as important when ranking the services students were most likely to consider using (figure 7). This may reflect a bias in the sample where a significant number of respondents reported they receive or have received Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).

Nevertheless, for every service listed, almost half respondents who responded said they would not use the services on offer- suggesting there was no clear trend in terms of services student sex workers were most likely to use and need. Counselling and sexual health services drew the most consistent responses across the three questions asked on what services student sex workers had used, would consider using and would not use. These two services got the least number of respondents claiming they would not use these services and were also most likely to have been used or a service student sex workers would consider using. However, a significant number of respondents said they would not use disability services (49%) or go for support from their personal tutors (49%) – despite these services being seen by other respondents as relatively important and a service they would consider using. Overall, accommodation services were least likely to have been used by the sample as well as more likely to be viewed as a service they would consider using and the most likely service respondents said they would not use. Other services mentioned as useful to students sex workers and not included in the original survey list included sex worker specific events/ groups and the Samaritans.

Figure 6: Services used by student sex workers

Services student sex workers have used	Percentage of student sex workers
Sexual health services	29%
Disability services	27%
Counselling	26%
Student Union Welfare/ Women's LGBT+ officer	24%
Personal Tutor	18%
Student Finance team	17%
Careers services	15%
Student led support groups	13%
Nightline	7%
Security services	7%
Accommodation	4%

Figure 7: Services sex workers would consider using

Service student sex workers would consider using	Percentage of student sex workers
Counselling	52%
Sexual health services	50%
Nightline	49%
Security services	47%
Student led support groups	44%
Careers services	40%
Student union welfare/ women's/ LGBT+ officer	39%
Student finance team	39%
Accommodation	38%
Personal tutor	33%
Disability services	24%



Figure 8: Services student sex workers would not use

Services student sex workers would not use	Percentage of student sex workers
Accommodation	57%
Disability	49%
Personal tutor	49%
Security services	47%
Careers	46%
Nightline	44%
Student finance team	44%
Student led support groups	42%
Student union welfare/ women's/ LGBT+ Officer	37%
Counselling	22%
Sexual health	21%

Out of those respondents who had reported to have used a service at their institution or union (less than 15 respondents for each service) the majority found them to have been helpful. The exception was for careers services: 4 respondents out of the 7 found their careers services either unhelpful or very unhelpful.

Despite the majority of respondents describing the services they had accessed as useful, a large majority felt that overall, the support on offer by their institution or their students' union was not sufficient (see figures 9 and 10). Respondents felt that the support provided by students' unions was better (13% of respondents said support was sufficient compared to 9% for institutions). Nevertheless, students' unions were not viewed much more positively than institutions.

Figure 9: Attitudes towards institutional support provided to students in the sex industry

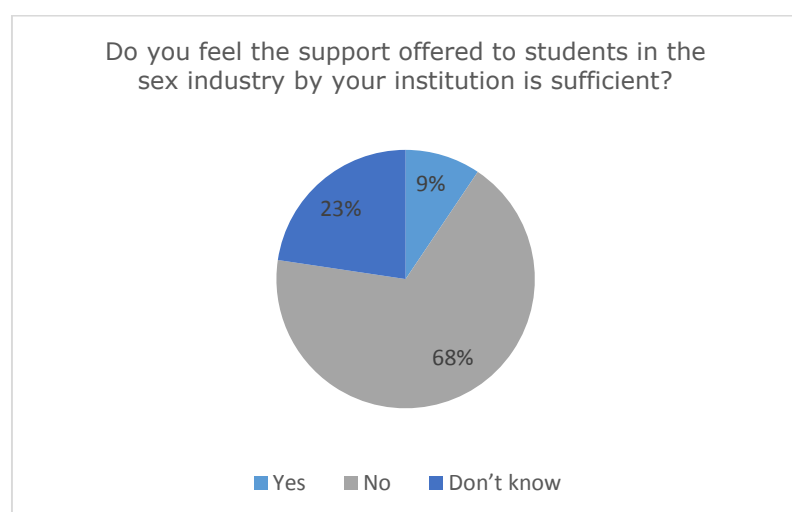
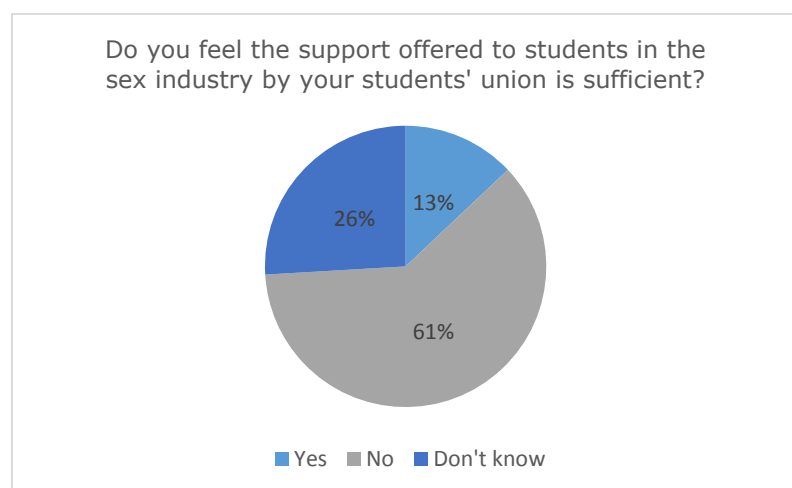


Figure 10: Attitudes towards students' union support provided to students in the sex industry



Additional institutional support requested by two respondents was for there to be more awareness of student sex workers and for staff members to “*acknowledge that student sex workers actually exist.*” One respondent wrote that there needs to be publication of resources around sex work that can be easily accessed by students. There were also a concern from one respondent around the impact of her sex work on her academic studies when she had to work late nights:

*“I had very big problems with coming into lectures due to a lot of anxiety as well as late nights. I would have needed more lecture capture and more leniency with deadlines and in class presentations. I was able to hand in work and got good grades on those assignments, so I wasn't lacking in knowledge, but the uni became very inaccessible to me due to their conviction that I couldn't study if I didn't attend every lecture, which was simply untrue”*

Two respondents left comments that they would like more support on how to leave the sex industry while one other respondent said they did *not* want staff to tell them to leave the industry. Of particular concern was a remark made by a respondent that they would like their institution not to drop them from their course as a result of their sex work.

Some similar themes were raised in relation to what further support students' unions could provide for student sex workers. This included comments that the SU could provide further information on what advice and services are available to student sex workers online, including ‘a mention of sex work on the students' union website.’ Linked to this was one other remark that ‘The student union could better support sex workers if they publicised their support for student sex workers more openly and made it clear they stand in solidarity with us.’ One participant mentioned that the students' union could do more outreach work (ScotPep was mentioned as a good example of this).

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## Advice and information

Following questions around support, the survey asked respondents whether they would like further information from their institution or students' union on a list of issues. The list of options provided included information on:

- Drug and alcohol issues
- Dealing with harassment
- Financial help
- Keeping safe at work
- Legality of sex work
- Mental health issues
- Mutual support from others in the industry

For all of these issues, almost half of respondents or higher said they were *not likely* to seek or need information from their institution/ students' union. Areas that respondents said they were 'somewhat likely' or 'very likely' to want more information/ advice on were mental health issues (64%) sexual health (53%) followed by financial help (51%); mutual support from others in the industry (44%) and the impact of sex work on coping with academic study (44%). Areas that elicited the highest numbers of 'not likely' to need information on were keeping safe at work (60%), legality of sex work (57%) and dealing with harassment (56%).

We also asked respondents whether they would like any other information from their university or students' union. Responses included:

- Information about students who may be coerced and want to transition out of sex work
- Information on sex work to raise awareness about student sex workers in the institution.
- Information on student sex workers rights and their right to continue to study even if they are engaging in sex work
- Information about campaigns and activism around sex workers' rights.
- Advice around how to reduce stigma
- Information on student sex worker support networks

Most respondents said that they would prefer to access support services relating to their sex work online via information on a website (67%). The second most popular way to access services was via leaflets (48%). 46% also said they would like to access support online via a chat function. The same number of respondents (46%) also said they would like to access support services face to face, talking to someone. This indicates that overall, while almost half the sample did desire face to face contact, the majority of respondents preferred to access support online or indirectly through written information. Smaller numbers of respondents said that they would like to access support via a handbook (30%) or over the phone (11%).

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# Discussion

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# Discussion

There is a growing body of work looking at what motivates students to enter into sex work, what types of sex work they are involved in, how this affects their health and wellbeing and broader perceptions of sex work by students and staff in further and higher education.

This research provides a small contribute to the literature and addresses a number of new questions on student sex workers understanding and views on the law surrounding sex work, their awareness of their rights as well as how students' unions and institutions can better support student sex workers. The research was also targeted at LGBT+ and women student sex workers to understand their views and experiences. As a result of this targeting, the majority of the sample was made up of women student sex workers and LGBT+ student sex workers. The experiences of LGBT+ student sex workers in particular is an under-researched area and these results provide a valuable insight into whether there are any differences. While it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions, the fact that many of the findings were similar to the results of other work done on student sex work (namely [The Student Sex Worker Project](#)<sup>7</sup>) suggests that the issues faced by LGBT+ student sex workers are similar to student sex workers as a whole. There was however, a high proportion of the sample who reported having mental health problems, and this may be connected to the large numbers of respondents who identified as LGBT+ given the higher rates of mental ill health amongst the LGBT+ population.

Similar to The Student Sex Worker Project, the research also aimed to look at the support student sex workers received and /or would like and their experiences of accessing help at their students' union and institution. The Student Sex Worker Project's research indicated there were significant gaps in policy and guidance on supporting student sex workers in HEIs as well as misunderstandings about sex work by some higher education staff. Worryingly, this report provides additional evidence that student sex workers may not be given the right support from staff in further or higher education institutions and/or students' unions and in some instances student sex workers have faced hostile behaviour from staff upon disclosure. This needs to be addressed in order to ensure student sex workers are not excluded from further or higher education as well as to ensure they have access to the appropriate support to do well.

## Motivations and entry in and out of the sex industry

In 2015 the Government announced the scrapping of maintenance grants for higher education students alongside cut backs to other financial support available, such as Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). It has been argued by NUS and others that cuts to the financial support available to students may increase the numbers of students entering into the sex industry because of financial concerns<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, the results of our research show that financial reasons may be a key motivating factor for students entering into sex work – with over half (67%) of respondents saying they were motivated to work in the sex industry to pay for their living expenses (food, bills etc.), paying the rent (53%) and to fund consumption such as clothes and books (51%). Other motivating factors reported included the flexibility of doing sex work to complement their studies

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(58%) or because respondents thought they would enjoy the work (31%). 27% of respondents also said they would stay in the sex industry because they enjoyed the job. These findings are similar to The Student Sex Worker Project's research which showed financial concerns were important for student's motivations for doing sex work and the need to generate money in a flexible way, as well as more intrinsic reasons related to anticipated pleasure.

Coercion was also mentioned by one respondent in our survey. While the number of students forced into sex work is likely to be low, it is critical given the serious nature of this circumstance, that there are appropriate mechanisms in place in further and higher education institutions to help those individuals who have been coerced into sex work.

Lastly, our survey indicates that sex workers may 'yo- yo' in and out of the sex industry even after they have graduated. For example, lack of jobs or mental health issues were significant barriers for some to leave the industry. Almost half (44%) said that mental health issues were a reason preventing them from leaving the sex industry and finding work in another field. Moreover, the findings indicate mental health problems may disproportionately affect student sex workers as over half of respondents (55%) said they had a mental health problem or accessed DSA (26%). Further research is needed in order to more fully understand the employment trajectories of students engaged in sex work after they have graduated and whether the assumption that students are more likely to stop selling sex once they have finished studying is valid<sup>9</sup>. For those students who continue to engage in sex work, however, the support networks built while they are in further and higher education could be vital source of support later on in their life.

## The working environment and the law

The result that over 60% of respondents said they felt safe very often or always while they were working is a positive finding and may be connected to the fact that the majority of the sample did not engage in work considered to be most dangerous (typically street sex work). Nevertheless, despite many respondents feeling 'safe', just under half of the sample, had experienced sexual assault. A third had also experienced physical assault. This indicates that while student sex workers can sometimes be perceived as being more 'privileged' and face less social exclusion compared to sex workers who are not in further or higher education<sup>10</sup>, there are still many student sex workers who experience traumatic events who will need access to relevant specialist support services - whether that be sexual assault referral centres, or university counselling and mental health services. It also means that further and higher education staff or staff/ officers at a students' union need to have an understanding of how students can report incidents of harassment and assault and how they can signpost to relevant services.

Support from the institution or students' union may be particularly important given the findings on the relationship between student sex workers and the police. Many respondents said they were reluctant to go to the police if they had experienced a crime whilst working in the sex industry and the majority (82%) had never contacted the police about a crime involving their work<sup>11</sup>. In addition, almost half (48%) of respondents said they would feel very uncomfortable at going to the police if they had experienced property theft, violence and sexual violence at the hands of clients and /or management. Poor relationships between sex workers and the police could further explain some respondent's comments that nothing can be done to punish perpetrators of physical or sexual violence. This indicates further work needs to be done to establish greater trust between student sex workers and the police, including greater awareness and training amongst police to understand the potential vulnerabilities of student sex workers and treat them as victims rather than offenders. In addition, it is important that student sex workers are aware of how to report incidents of violence/ harassment via other routes—such as through services such as Ugly Mugs.

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In addition to recommendations around greater police training around sex work, many UK organisations who work with sex workers have called for changes in the law on sex work. Most recently, Amnesty International supported full decriminalisation of sex work that does not involve coercion, exploitation or abuse<sup>12</sup>. At the time of writing this report, however, the [Home Affairs Select Committee](#) are conducting an inquiry into sex work to 'assess whether the balance in the burden of criminality should shift to those who pay for sex rather than those who sell it'. The findings from this survey suggest that such a change in the law would go against the wishes of the majority of respondents in the survey as well as against the preferences of sex workers more broadly<sup>13</sup>. When we asked student sex workers about their views about the law and sex work, the majority of our sample supported decriminalisation and just 18% supported criminalisation. This is also in a context where most respondents said they understood the legal status of their sex work.

## Service use, support and guidance

Overall service use amongst respondents was low. Services which had been accessed the most were sexual health services, counselling and disability services. Use of disability services may be high in relation to the sample because 26% said they received DSA. It is encouraging to find that amongst the small number of respondents who had used services, the majority reported having had a positive experience.

Nevertheless, for each service listed, almost half of respondents stated they would not use it, with services such as accommodation services and (contradictorily) disability services being at the top of that list. Those services most likely to be *considered* by student sex workers were sexual health services, counselling and mental health services. This corresponds with other research indicating that student sex workers are more likely to access counselling services compared to students who do not work in the sex industry<sup>14</sup>.

Worryingly, just a third of respondents said that they would consider going to see their personal tutor about an issue relating to their sex work and almost half of the sample said they would not use their personal tutor for support. Slightly higher numbers said they would consider going to their students' union welfare/ women's or LGBT+ officer (39%) whereas 37% said they would not. Further research is needed in order to understand why such a high proportion of the sample would not consider using certain services at all and whether this is related to problems of trust, stigma or access. For instance, one respondent said 'I would really prefer no one at my college to know, it wouldn't end well for me,' indicating that for them, silence was preferable to seeking support. For those services most likely to be used by student sex workers – namely sexual health, counselling and mental health services – it is important that staff are aware of how they can most appropriately support them with any welfare issues connected to their sex work.

Given the responses to questions around service use, it is perhaps unsurprising that overall respondents felt that the support on offer either by their institution or students' union was insufficient. The comments given show this may be connected to a number of issues including:

- not enough raising awareness that student sex workers exist in further and higher education
- not enough information/ resources on sex work that can be accessed by students (including what support services are available for student sex workers)
- Poor staff attitudes amongst staff upon disclosure and how to respond to a disclosure in terms of advice on exiting.
- No structures to study more flexibly

- Not enough outreach work

Of particular concern was a remark made by one respondent who had been told to drop their course by a member of staff if they did not give up their sex work. This is concerning, not only because it may indicate a lack of understanding about sex work amongst staff but because such behaviour indicates staff may be prioritising the institutions own reputation over and above the wellbeing and academic success of a student who is engaged in sex work.

Poor experiences amongst individual student sex workers who have disclosed to further or higher education staff may contribute to lack of trust and reduce the likelihood of them coming forward to access support. Indeed, our survey shows very few student sex workers have disclosed to either staff or officers at their students union (8%) or to their personal tutor (12%). This may be because they have not needed support or because of the stigma. However, it may also be because there is mistrust and lack of confidence in their institution and students' union to respond well (as shown above). In contrast to low disclosure rates by student sex workers to professional staff in further and higher education, the findings show that many more student sex workers had disclosed to friends (73%). Friends may therefore be one means of support – although it is also concerning that they were also the most likely group that respondents said they had faced harassment from as a result of their sex work.

Moving forward, some respondents said that they were somewhat likely or very likely to want more in information or advice from their institution or students' union on mental health issues (64%), sexual health (53%) or financial help (51%). For any form of information/ guidance, most respondents preferred this information to be online rather than face to face. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of student sex workers said they didn't need any further support in terms of information or guidance. This may reflect the sample, where respondents felt relatively well informed or it could stem from other factors, including a lack of confidence or unwillingness to access information from their institution or students' union.

## Limitations and further research

The findings of this report are primarily limited by the small sample size. This means it is not possible to say whether the findings are representative of student sex workers across the UK. It is also not possible to do comparisons between different groups– such as comparing whether there are statistically significant differences in the experiences of LGBT+ student sex workers and non LGBT+ student sex workers or between student sex workers engaged in different types of sex work. Further research is needed to more fully understand the diversity of experiences of student sex workers from different backgrounds and studying in a range of further and higher education institutions - this sample primarily consisted of LGBT+, white students in higher education. Further research would also be useful around what student sex workers support needs are and why there are high rates of dissatisfaction with the support on offer at their institution and /or their students' union.



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# Recommendations

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# Recommendations

*These recommendations are made in reference to the findings from The Student Sex Worker Project and in light of the findings from this research:*

- Further and higher education institutions and students' union have a duty to recognise student sex workers exist and may need access to help and support as result of their sex work. They should acknowledge that for some students, sex work is a choice while also recognising and providing help for any students who have been coerced into sex work.
- Given the majority of student sex workers in this survey did not have access to additional financial support in terms of maintenance grants, institutional bursaries, scholarships or DSA, institutions should consider what further financial support is available to students who are facing significant financial hardship.
- As The Student Sex Worker Project recommends - a basic level of training should be given to all staff in further and higher education institutions and students unions on sex work so they not discriminate and stigmatise student sex workers who disclose. Training should cover:
  - The diversity of occupations within the sex industry
  - Legalities of sex work
  - Stereotyping and stigma
  - The needs of student sex workers
  - Anti-discrimination protections and available student support
  - Appropriate protocols in case a student experiences sexual violence and assault, including how they can report an incident to services outside of the police.

Particular training should also be given on how sex work does not necessarily have a negative impact on a students' studies or wellbeing.

- Further and higher education institutions should not approach student sex work as a disciplinary matter. Any enquiry into the conduct or fitness to practice of a student on a programme leading to a professional or non-professional qualification should be mindful of the fact that most forms of sex work are not considered to be illegal and that there is little consensus on what constitutes 'bringing the profession into disrepute'. Institutions should instead look at how they can support the student, rather than seeking disciplinary or fitness to practice sanctions. No student should be forced to leave their course solely on the fact they do direct/ indirect sex work.
- For those services most likely to be used by student sex workers – namely sexual health, counselling and mental health services - it is important that staff are aware of how they can most appropriately support all student sex workers, including LGBT+ student sex workers, and help them in a non-judgemental way.
- Institutions and students' unions should work together to review mental health provision in order to ensure it is meeting student sex workers' needs as well as signposting and promoting access to mental health services for the benefit of all students.
- Local police should follow best practice in trying to protect student sex workers if they report an incident of harassment or assault, including sexual harassment and assault, rather than treating them as offenders.
- The findings in this research suggest that further criminalisation of sex work would not be welcomed by student sex workers. The Government should consider and further consult on the benefits of full decriminalisation of sex work, in line with the majority of student sex workers who supported decriminalisation here.

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- Further research is needed in order to understand why such a high proportion of student sex workers in this sample would not consider using certain services at all, including personal tutors and the students' union.
  - NUS and students' unions - in collaboration with organisations who support and work with sex workers - should consider producing online information or advice that signposts student sex workers towards mental health, sexual health and financial support services.

# Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The findings are presented mainly as percentages of the total sample (55). However, in some cases where the response rate is less than 10, numbers, rather than percentages are used.

<sup>2</sup> This was an open response. Answers were written.

<sup>3</sup> [Sexual Offences Act 2003](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Sexual Offences Act, 1956](#)

<sup>5</sup> Please see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-32955767>

<sup>6</sup> There were only 7 respondents for this question. 4 respondents therefore make up 57%.

<sup>7</sup> Sagar. T et al. (2015) [The Student Sex Work Project](#), Research Summary, Swansea University

<sup>8</sup> See Roberts R. et al. (2010) Participation in sex work: students' views, *Sex Education*, Vol. 10. No.2: 145-156. It is also worth noting that Sagar. T et al. (2015) found that the majority of student sex workers do not make much money from their sex work. The increasing 'sexual economy of higher education' has also been argued to be a reason behind growing numbers of student sex workers, particularly in specific sex industries, such as dancers in the adult entertainment or stripping industry. See Sanders. T and Hardy. K (2015) Students selling sex: marketization, higher education and consumption, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36:5: 747-765.

<sup>9</sup> Balfour. R and Allen. J (2014) *A review of the Literature on Sex Workers and Social Exclusion*, UCL Institute of Health Equity, Inclusion Health.

<sup>10</sup> Balfour. R and Allen. J (2014: 4) describe student sex work as more likely to be a 'lifestyle choice.'

<sup>11</sup> Ugly Mugs report that around three quarters off all sex workers do not report crimes to the police. Please see <http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/draft-proposals-developed-to-assist-forces-deal-with-sex-work> and [http://transact.westminster.gov.uk/docstores/publications\\_store/policy-scrutiny/sex-worker-report-2013.pdf](http://transact.westminster.gov.uk/docstores/publications_store/policy-scrutiny/sex-worker-report-2013.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/08/sex-workers-rights-are-human-rights/>

<sup>13</sup> This [survey](#) shows nine out of 10 sex workers report they are specifically against criminalizing the buying of sex.

<sup>14</sup> Sagar. T et al. (2015) [The Student Sex Work Project](#), Research Summary, Swansea University

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