

TO: Assembly

FROM: Ewan Swift

RE: Supporting Student Sex Workers: Core Position

DATE: 3 June 2021

The belief and its justification

Student sex workers¹ should not face any barriers to accessing support which is well informed and free from prejudice.

In March 2015, the Student Sex Work Project² highlighted that the rising cost of University and associated living expenses had contributed to an increase in the number of students engaging in sex work with 4.8% reporting that they had been involved in sex work in some capacity. Additionally, around 1 in 5 respondents stated that they had at some point considered working in the sex industry. Given that the Covid-19 pandemic has created financial hardships for many students, and that financial reasons are heavily cited in the top ten reasons for entering sex work, it is likely that these numbers have increased.

As with any other student, those who engage in sex work have a range of support needs that may be related to or independent of their sex work. Nonetheless, due to the stigma attached to sex work many students choose to keep the work they do private, with 50.7% of respondents citing secrecy as a negative impact of working in the sex industry. This may act as a significant barrier to students disclosing their engagement in sex work when relevant to their support needs, or in accessing support all together.

Additionally, the above survey highlighted that for University staff to provide appropriate support to students who disclose their engagement in sex work, 62.8% would need additional policy or guidance to respond appropriately. This is primarily due to a lack of understanding surrounding the legality of sex work in the UK, support needs of student sex workers, and support services available. Given this, there is a risk that any support which student sex workers do receive may come from staff that lack the required understanding to provide appropriate non-judgemental support.

Our ultimate belief is that students who engage in sex work should not face any barriers to accessing whatever form of support they require, and that any support they do receive should be well informed and free from prejudice.

Definition of a better future

Students who engage in sex work will be able to access whatever form of support they require without the fear of stigma or prejudice. Where a student's needs are relevant to their sex work, they

¹ Sex work can refer to escorting, erotic dancing, stripping, pole dancing, pornography, webcamming, adult modelling, sugar arrangements, phone sex, and selling sex (on and off the street).

² <http://www.thestudentsexworkproject.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/TSSWP-Research-Summary-English.pdf>

will be able turn to the SU and University to seek information and guidance surrounding their rights and will be appropriately signposted to support services. More generally, staff will feel that they have a fuller understanding of the definition and legality of sex work, and the appropriate guidance in place to respond accordingly to disclosures of sex work from students.

The barriers

Prejudices and stigmas inhibit people's ability to provide adequate support for students engaged in sex work. It also remains the case that certain activities surrounding sex work are criminalised, although not all, leading to confusion around the legality of sex work more generally. Given the fact that the criminalisation of sex work is itself a socio-political issue, people who have particularly strong views about sex work may also have internalised resistance to adopting policies that they deem inappropriate or at odds with their personal views. There may also be an institutional lack of willingness to publicly show support for student sex workers.

Given this, it is necessary to ensure that information is disseminated to increase staff understanding and awareness of sex work, and that guidance is provided which centres the support needs of individual students and equips staff to appropriate respond.

Belief about the change and responsibilities

The position of Durham Students' Union is:

That the SU should develop a Student Sex Work Toolkit similar to that created at the University of Leicester³ and lobby the University to also adopt it.

That the SU should design a Student Sex Work Policy similar to that used at the University of Leicester⁴ and lobby the University to adopt it.

That the SU should provide information and support for student sex workers through its advice service⁵

That the SU should support organisations such as National Ugly Mugs, Support for Student Sex Workers and the North East Sex Work Forum

³ <https://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/offices/edi/student-sex-work-toolkit-final-december-2020.pdf>

⁴ <https://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/offices/edi/student-sex-work-policy-final-december-2020.pdf>

⁵ Example (York University Students' Union): <https://yusu.org/advice-support/support-a-z/supporting-student-sex-workers#>