

# ACADEMIC INNOVATION PROJECT - REPORT 2021-22

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## Online Safety Resource for Students in the Commercial (Legal) Sex Industry

### What did you set out to do?



In collaboration with the New Futures Project, a local charity specializing in sex work, the project aimed to create an online safety resource in the form of online digital storytelling (such as YouTube videos) to support students who are working in the commercial (legal) sex industry. The online safety resource has predetermined domains to provide sex work specific resource links, such as to the National Ugly Mugs, where sex workers can report ‘dodgy punters’ (purchasers of sex) to warn other sex workers who may be in danger. This will decrease the students’ risk of crimes and improve their safety. Furthermore, there will be links to Mental Health Support resources to increase student well-being (see <https://swop.org.au/mental-health>). This well-being site offers advice on monitoring mental health and how to address burnout in the sex industry, it further gives advice that students should, “Nourish your emotional self by listening to soothing music, gardening or following a creative pursuit like writing or art—all are great methods of self-expression”. As such, sections on having a pet and mental health and gardening have been added to bolster mental health. In addition, students will be educated on the risks of using alcohol and/or drugs when working and how to mediate these risks using Harm Reduction International’s “When sex work and drug use overlap”; there will be a direct benefit for students who may have a substance use disorder, linking them to drug services. There is also a drop in run by Turning Point at New Futures that female sex workers can attend that is confidential and anonymous. There is even a section for LGBT+ sex workers. Finally, the online safety resource will provide links to further safety advice.

### How have you achieved it?



Partially, we have created the website informed by feedback from our Advisory Board and New Futures Project. We would like to acknowledge our Advisory Board for their continuous support to combat stigma. However, due to the level of stigma present we felt unable to run the research part of the project to safeguard students. Therefore, we could not inform the safety resource with the specific needs of the students at De Montfort University working or having worked in the commercial sex industry.

### What next?



- Getting the website listed as a resource link on Healthy DMU and the De Montfort Student Union’s Sexual and Reproductive Health webpage.
- Awaiting student feedback from the “tell us what you think” section of the webpage.
- Applying for a small grant to work on combating stigma towards students working in the commercial (legal) sex industry.

### Benefits for the University



Around 1 in 5 students have been or are involved in the legal sex industry. Students who have exited express that early intervention through support was a key factor. (Sagar, Jones, Symons, & Bowring; 2015). This online safety resource will aid in assisting to exit where appropriate, through early intervention, which should lead to better health and well-being outcomes for this group of students.

### Benefits for Subject Community



Students have reported needing specific support in regards to employment or relationship advice, suggesting that there is a vast array of support required (Sagar, Jones, Symons, Tyrie, & Roberts; 2015 ), that can have a secondary positive effect on health and well-being. Students working in the sex industry have reported that the National Union of Students (NUS) should be providing students in the sex industry more support, particularly safety, as well as employment, financial tuition, and housing support. The same needs are mimicked when students were asked if the University should provide further support. (Roberts, Sanders, Myers, & Smith; 2010).

### Benefits for Students



***Facts about sex work from The Student Sex Worker Project (UK) Research Summary 2015:***

- 41% of student sex workers involved in direct work have ever expressed a need for support, and 29% of indirect student sex workers.
- 52% of student sex workers involved in direct work have ever reached out for support for their work from a professional, and 24% of indirect student sex workers.
- 65.4% of student sex workers wanted guidance on support for online sex work.
- Compared to non-sex working students (15%) students who engaged in commercial sex work were more likely to make use of University counselling services (21%).

This online resource, that can be viewed from the privacy of their own home, will aid in meeting the above needs of students to promote health and well-being.

### Benefits for Staff



The project will have an indirect impact on staff who can sign-post students to the safety resource, to be supportive of students in an unbiased manner, further breaking down the stigma associated with sex work. As such, the safety resource will be a real resource for staff who may feel uncomfortable sign posting students who work in the sex industry. From the National Student Sex Worker Project we know that students tend to exit the sex industry quicker when they receive staff support, so by increasing this we should see our students exit the sex industry sooner (if they want of course!).



### References:

Roberts, R., Sanders, T., Myers, E., & Smith, D. (2010). Participation in sex work: Students' views. *Sex Education*, 10(2), 145-156.

Sagar, T., Jones, D., Symons, K., and Bowring, J. (2015). The Student Sex Work Project. <http://www.thestudentsexworkproject.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/TSSWP-Research-Summary-English.pdf>



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