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# Sex work and students: an exploratory study

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Available evidence suggests that changes in the funding of higher education have led to some students entering the sex industry in order to make ends meet. The current study comprises a sample of undergraduates (N=130) in the south of England, who completed a cross-sectional survey of their financial circumstances, health, psychological well-being, substance use and lifestyle. A response rate of 74% was obtained. Data indicated that over 10% of all respondents knew of students engaged in sex work (defined as prostitution, escorting, lap dancing or stripping) in order to support themselves financially. Poor psychological well-being, drinking problems and financial circumstances were associated with sex work, and although no direct evidence was found linking this to an earlier history of sexual abuse, there was an indirect relationship through the impact of abuse on mental health. A logistic regression model incorporating General Health Questionnaire scores, alcohol problems and hours worked outside of study strongly predicted whether respondents knew of students engaged in sex work. For lap dancing in particular the model was very strong. This study provides further evidence of students' participation in sex work and its association with economic circumstances. Further longitudinal work is required to clarify the nature of these relationships.

## **Background: changes in the structure of UK higher education**

Students are commonly perceived as living a life of debauchery and revelry with few cares and responsibilities. The reality of this romanticised perception, however, is starkly different from the fact that many now lead less than happy lives. This cannot be divorced from the economic situation that they face. The abolition of mandatory grants in the 1990s left many having to take out long-term loans to meet their financial needs, leading in turn to increased debts. The introduction of tuition fees has further exacerbated student hardship with evidence pointing to levels of soaring personal debt, and increases in the time expected to pay this off. A National Westminster Bank (2004) survey puts the average student debt in 2004 at £12,180, a rise of 50% over the previous year, with one-third of students now believing it will take ten years to pay this off. Unfortunately, this means that many young people who

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enter the education system must face deferring cultural aspirations such as parenthood and home ownership because they cannot afford them.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, financial barriers to higher education in the UK have been accompanied by a dramatic increase in the number of both full- and part-time students, with a marked increase in the number of mature and part-time female students. With the proportion of students who are parents now estimated at 10% (Roberts *et al.*, 2000), it is likely that a major attraction of part-time education is that it leaves more time for paid employment, childcare and other domestic responsibilities (Whitaker, 2001). Part-time students in higher education, however, currently lack the same entitlement to financial support with tuition fees that is otherwise available to full-time students and postgraduates (*Guardian*, 2005). The wisdom behind this lack of financial support for potentially vulnerable sections of the student population is hard to fathom from either a humanistic or even an economic vantage point.

The economic necessities of student life now mean that a high proportion of all students, both full- and part-time, must work in an effort to support their study and control patterns of spiralling debt. Unfortunately, working takes up substantial periods of time that should otherwise be available for study. Prior to the introduction of tuition fees, Lindsay and Paton-Saltzburg (1993) and Roberts *et al.* (2000) found that a sizeable proportion of students were working in excess of 20 hours per week. Consequently, since the introduction of fees the number of hours worked by students will have increased to control debt. As several studies suggest, the demanding economic situation facing students may be the root cause of a host of problems, most notably, psychological distress which is now an 'endemic in the student body' that even impairs exam performance (Lindsay & Paton-Saltzburg, 1993; Windle, 1993; National Union of Students, 1994; Hodgeson & Simoni, 1995; Roberts *et al.*, 2000; Roberts & Zelenyanszki, 2002; Andrews & Wilding, 2004). The presence of increased involvement of students in the casual labour force also creates an oversupply of workers that in turn has contributed to driving down the value of wages, thereby compounding further financial hardship.

### **Sex work**

By pitting economic pressure, the requirement to work, and the need for education against each other, a vicious cycle is set in motion that leads some students to turn to seemingly quick ways of maximising their income through illegal commerce and work in the sex industry. The short-term gain of such work brings in more money and therefore allows more time for students to devote to study compared with the poorly paid jobs that are typically available (Lantz, 2004; Moffat & Peters, 2004). Anecdotal evidence of this response to economic pressure among students was first presented by Barrett in 1997. Further support has been provided by Roberts and colleagues (Roberts *et al.*, 2000; Roberts & Zelenyanszki, 2002) who found over 10% of their sample knew of other students involved in crime to make ends meet, 22% knew students engaging in drug dealing and 3–4% reported knowing students

who were involved in prostitution to support themselves financially. A positive response on each of these issues was significantly associated with being in debt.

To our dismay these are the only UK data pertinent to understanding the prevalence of student involvement in the sex industry. These results together with evidence from several disparate sources (Barrett, 1997; Chapman, 2001; Whitaker, 2001; Glendinning, 2004; Lantz, 2004; Sedgman, 2004) suggest increasing numbers of female students are entering the sex industry in order to make ends meet. Many seem to feel that the prospect of significantly fewer working hours, and the considerably higher wage that the sex industry offers, is a logical alternative to engaging in less well-paid employment (Sedgman, 2004) and a means to evade poverty, severe debts and exclusion from the education system (Whitaker, 2001). Some students interviewed have entered wet T-shirt contests to win money, whereas others have auctioned their virginity on the Internet (BBC, 2004) or started work in brothels (Chapman, 2001). The Praed Street Project in London, England's primary clinic for sex workers, has noticed a similar trend, and claims that a growing number of its clients are students. Furthermore, these students agree that the main motivation behind their choice of work is increased economic pressure brought about by the abolition of the student grant and the introduction of fees (Chapman, 2001).

Moffat and Peters (2004) have recently examined the pricing of personal services and earnings of workers in the UK prostitution industry. They collected data from the website Punternet ([www.punternet.com](http://www.punternet.com)) which purports to provide a means for exchanging information between clients and sexual service providers. They found that prostitutes earn more than double the wage of non-manual workers and more than three times that of manual workers. Earnings in the sex industry are also positively correlated with earnings from alternative employment. Hence a sex worker in London will earn more than a sex worker in another part of the UK. Furthermore, a significant effect was found for age, indicating that younger personal service providers in the late teens and early twenties earned higher wages than older sex workers. Being a young student will thus elevate one's earning capacity even more. Similar findings have been reported by Raymond *et al.* (2001). These data provide convincing evidence for the major role that money plays in the decision to take up sex work. Our own preliminary analysis of data from the Punternet website found that many 'field reports' submitted by clients explicitly referred to the student status of the women working as sexual service providers as an 'attraction', with some indication that the numbers of such reports have been increasing over time (from 24 in 2000 to 63 in 2004). These women are generally working from their home, in massage parlours or saunas or as escorts.

The trend for student involvement in sex work has been seen in other countries with similar student support and tuition fee policies. Anecdotal evidence from Sedgman (2004) suggested that approximately half of all brothel workers in Melbourne, Australia, are students. These women professed an intention to quit their work in the sex industry as soon as they had finished their degree. Sex work was seen as a job that they would only do during their studies, in order to afford their

education and living expenses. A study by Lantz (2004) also in Melbourne, which investigated the social, educational, economic and environmental influences on female students' decisions to enter sex work also supports contentions that financial strain is the major factor. In a BBC World Service interview with one of the authors in 2001, the owner of a massage parlour in Leeds who admitted employing large numbers of students, remarked that in her day, people went to university in order to avoid this kind of life—whereas now they lead this kind of life in order to go to university. Irony indeed.

The current study aims to gather more systematic evidence on the involvement of UK students in the sex industry as a necessary means of supplementing their income. The practical and ethical difficulties of studying this area are considerable (Roberts *et al.*, 2007). Here we are taking a route that minimises some of these difficulties and employ indirect measures of involvement. We assume that knowledge of other students engaged in sex work is likely to be related to the prevalence of sex work itself, i.e. the more students are engaged in sex work then the more other students will know about it.

Similarly, we will differentiate between different categories of sex work (e.g. lap dancing, stripping and escorting) and explore the economic and psychological correlates of knowing people engaged in these types of sex work. We wish to ascertain whether individuals with a history of past sexual abuse are more likely to know of other students participating in sex work and whether the prevalence of knowledge of sex work observed in the current study has increased since the introduction of tuition fees. This will involve a direct comparison with estimates derived from the study by Roberts *et al.* (2000).

## Method

### *Participants and design*

An opportunity sample of 130 undergraduate students from a university in London was asked to complete a questionnaire providing information on demographic characteristics, financial circumstances, lifestyle (smoking, drug and alcohol consumption), physical and psychological well-being. Completed questionnaires were received from 96 students (males=12, females=84); a response rate of 73.8%. Mean age of respondents was 22.8 years (SD=8.8) for males and 20.6 (SD=4.2) for females. The sample predominantly comprised those in full-time education (n=94, 97.9%).

### *Questionnaire items*

The 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ; Goldberg & Williams, 1988) was used to measure mental health. The chronic method of scoring (GHQc) was employed. A score of 1 is given to those questions endorsed with either a 3 or 4, with a cut-off score of 3 used to indicate probable psychological disorder (Goodchild & Duncan-Jones, 1985). Higher scores are thus indicative of poorer well-being. Self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg's (1965) 14-item scale.

Physical health was measured using an inventory of 14 different physical symptoms based on those used in the UK General Household Survey (OPCS, 1979). Respondents were to indicate the presence or absence of each one in the two weeks prior to questionnaire completion. In addition, a single-item measure of General Health and the Pain subscale from the SF-36 health survey were used (Ware *et al.*, 1993). Body Mass Index (BMI) was computed from height and weight. A range of health behaviours was also assessed. These included alcohol use (units of alcohol consumed during the preceding week), smoking (numbers of cigarettes smoked) and recreational drug use (a summary score was calculated based on the number of different drugs currently used). The four CAGE screening questions were used to estimate the presence of problem drinking (Mayfield *et al.*, 1974) with a cut-off score of greater than 2 employed. The Eating Attitudes Test (Garner & Garfinkel, 1979; Garner *et al.*, 1982) was used to measure problems with eating. A score of greater than 20 on the first 26 items is considered suggestive of a problem. Previous sexual abuse was ascertained by asking whether respondents had ever been forced or frightened by someone into doing something sexually that they did not want, together with the respondents' age when this first occurred. Further items enquired into amount of debt, size of student loan, degree of difficulty experienced in paying bills, and the number of hours worked in paid employment outside university. Items were also included which asked whether respondents knew of any students (male or female) who had participated in drug trials or engaged in drug dealing, crime, lap dancing, stripping or escorting/prostitution to help support themselves financially. A single-item question was used to measure recent suicide ideation.

## **Analysis**

The relationships between knowledge of students engaged in sex work and a variety of categorical variables (gender, presence of alcohol problems, prior sexual abuse, eating problems, year of study, overseas v. home student status, BMI category) were examined by cross-tabulation. For  $2 \times 2$  tables, probabilities were computed using Fisher's exact test. The relationship between the different measures of financial status was analysed using linear correlation. The relationship between knowledge of student sex work and a number of continuous variables (amount of debt, current student loan, hours working outside of academic study) was examined by computing linear regression models. Logistic regression models were used to examine the predictors of sex work, both individual types of work and a composite indicative of participation in any kind of sex work. Models were computed separately for female respondents and for the whole sample. Various indices of model fit are reported; per cent correct classification of cases, Cox and Snell  $R^2$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2$  and Menard  $R^2$ . Based on the correlations between variables, path analysis was employed to describe the pathways leading to participation in sex work. Comparison between the present study and an earlier study by Roberts *et al.* (2000) of the prevalence of respondents who know of students engaged in prostitution was undertaken by Fisher's exact test. All analyses were conducted using SPSS (11.0).

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

Fifty-nine per cent of respondents were working in addition to studying ( $n=57$ ), doing an average of 15.39 hours per week (ranging from 4 to 45 hours). Of the sample, 10.5% ( $n=10$ ) reported knowing students who were engaged in sex work in order to support themselves financially. Amongst the female respondents the figure was 8.3% ( $n=7$ ). For the individual types of sex work, 6.3% ( $n=6$ ) respondents endorsed the item for lap dancing, 4.2% ( $n=4$ ) for stripping, and 6.3% ( $n=6$ ) for escorting/prostitution. Almost one-seventh of the sample (13.5%,  $n=13$ ), all of them female (15.5% of female respondents), reported having previously been sexually abused. Almost a quarter of these ( $n=3$ ) reported the abuse as occurring before they were 12 years of age. Eating problems were reported by 11.5% of the sample ( $n=11$ ). Sexual abuse itself was strongly associated with having an eating problem; 45.5% of those with eating problems reported having been sexually abused compared to only 9.9% of those without an eating problem ( $p=0.007$ , odds-ratio=7.6).

Mean GHQc score was 3.71 ( $SD=3.69$ ). This was significantly greater for those with a history of prior sexual abuse (5.77 v 3.41,  $p=0.03$ ,  $\beta=0.22$ ). Almost half of the sample (47.9%,  $n=46$ ) met the criterion ( $GHQc>2$ ) for probable psychiatric disorder. Measures of economic status were significantly related to each other. The magnitude of tuition fees paid was related to the amount of debt respondents had accrued ( $r=0.38$ ,  $p<0.0005$ ), which in turn was related to the size of student loans taken out ( $r=0.38$ ,  $p<0.0005$ ), the degree of difficulty in paying bills ( $r=0.28$ ,  $p=0.009$ ) and the length of time studying ( $r=0.23$ ,  $p=0.03$ ). Year of study was in turn related to the number of hours worked outside of study ( $r=0.34$ ,  $p=0.001$ ).

### *Correlates of sex work*

There was some suggestion that males ( $n=3$ , 25%) were more likely than females ( $n=7$ , 8.4%) to know of students engaged in sex work ( $p=0.11$ ). Mean GHQc (6.70 v 3.37,  $p=0.007$ ,  $\beta=0.28$ ), Eat-26 scores (15.30 v 7.40,  $p=0.025$ ,  $\beta=0.24$ ) and number of hours worked outside of study (17.60 v 8.25,  $p=0.003$ ,  $\beta=0.30$ ) were significantly greater for those respondents who endorsed any of the items for sex work. The presence of an alcohol problem was strongly associated with knowing students participating in sex work. Sixty per cent of respondents found to have an alcohol problem ( $n=3$ ) endorsed the items for sex work, compared to 7% ( $n=6$ ) of those without an alcohol problem ( $p=0.006$ , odds-ratio=20). There was some indication that as year of study advanced so did the likelihood that students would report knowing students engaged in sex work to support themselves financially ( $p=0.027$ ). This increased from 3.6% ( $n=2$ ) of those in their first year, to 18.2% ( $n=6$ ) of second-years to 28.6% ( $n=2$ ) of third-years. No direct associations/relationships were found between previous sexual abuse

( $p=0.63$ ), home v. overseas student status ( $p=1.0$ ), BMI category ( $p=0.25$ ) or self-esteem ( $p=0.14$ ) and reporting knowing students participating in sex work.

### Multivariate analysis

A logistic model comprising presence of an alcohol problem, GHQc score and total working hours outside study was constructed to predict knowledge of sex work. The model was found to be highly significant (Model  $\chi^2(3)=30.21$ ,  $P<0.0005$ ,  $-2 \log$  likelihood=28.52) and to fit the data well. Overall, 94.5% of cases were correctly classified (55.6% positive predictive capacity and 98.8% negative predictive capacity). Pseudo  $R^2$  measures suggested a strong model with values ranging from 28% for the Cox and Snell  $R^2$ , to 51% for Menard's  $R^2$  and 59% for Nagelkerke's  $R^2$ . Individually each predictor was significant (for alcohol problems, Wald  $\chi^2(1)=8.08$ ,  $p=0.004$ , for GHQc  $\chi^2(1)=5.80$ ,  $p=0.016$  and for working hours  $\chi^2(1)=7.20$ ,  $P=0.007$ ). This model was then applied to predict knowledge of sex workers in particular categories. Results are shown in Table 1.

The differential success of this model in predicting knowledge of different categories of sex work raises a number of questions. One possibility is that if these variables are indexing student participation in sex work (a point considered in the later discussion) the model would suggest that different risk factors may be involved in the pathways leading to sex work, and that the pathways to these types of work are quite different. To investigate the relationship between the different categories of work, measures of association (Cramer's V) were calculated between each type of sex work. For lap dancing and stripping this was high ( $V=0.80$ ,  $p<0.0005$ ), whereas for lap dancing and escort work the value was low ( $V=0.29$ ,  $p=0.005$ ), as was the association between stripping and escort work ( $V=0.38$ ,  $p<0.0005$ ).

Table 1. Predicting knowledge of sex workers

Type of sex work	Predictors ( $p < 0.10$ )	Model strength		
		Predictive capacity		
		Positive	Negative	Pseudo <sup>1</sup> $R^2$
Lap dancing	GHQc	83.3%	100%	31–81%
	Alcohol problems			
	Total working hours			
Stripping	Alcohol problems	75%	100%	23–75%
	Total working hours			
Escort/Prostitution	Total working hours	40%	100%	15–44%

<sup>1</sup>Values for Pseudo  $R^2$  shown are Cox and Snell  $R^2$  and Nagelkerke's  $R^2$ .

Path analysis

Though somewhat speculative, on the basis of the previous analyses, a diagram representing different pathways to sex work in the sample is illustrated in Figure 1. Note that this is not a formal path analysis because the outcome measure used is binary, prohibiting the use of logistic regression to decompose the forward pathways (Davis, 1985). Coefficients shown are therefore based on correlational analyses. We believe the model, however, has descriptive utility in dissecting different routes that may lead to participation in sex work; namely, adverse economic circumstances, poor psychological well being arising from early sexual abuse, and unhealthy levels of drinking.

Has the prevalence of sex student work changed over time?

Although this question cannot be approached directly, we compared data from the current study with the only other comparable study (Roberts et al., 2000) to provide quantitative estimates for the prevalence of student knowledge of participation in prostitution. Specifically, we compared the estimates from Roberts et al. (2000) with those from the current study. The number of respondents reporting that they know students involved in prostitution to support themselves financially increased from 3.99% in 2000 to 6.3% in 2006. A Fisher’s exact test found this was not statistically significant (p=0.41).

Discussion

This study confirms a considerable amount of anecdotal evidence and replicates earlier work (Roberts et al., 2000) that suggests that students are participating in the sex industry as a consequence of financial hardship. We acknowledge that there are difficulties with the research questions and measures we have used, and how they may be interpreted. Asking students whether they know of other students involved in

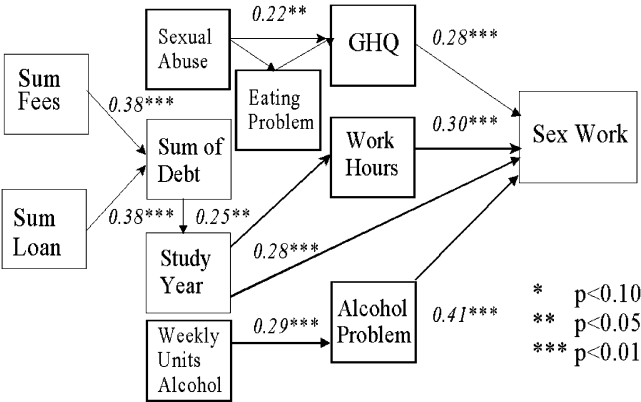


Figure 1. Different pathways to sex work

sex work is of course not ideal because it does not directly capture individual involvement. However, its advantage is that it has provided a conduit through the maze of research ethics committee requirements. A further advantage is that respondents can describe themselves without risk of feeling their own situation could be exposed (Roberts *et al.*, 2007). As one would expect if they had been talking about themselves, the measure did in fact correlate with individual financial, physical and psychological measures and its utility is further supported by the fact that using it we were able to produce models with strong predictive ability. We also acknowledge that the limited sample statistical power of the present study cannot establish with certainty whether students are involved in sex work as a direct consequence of rising financial hardship brought on by tuition fees. However, we argue that despite our limited sample size, the strong effect sizes and the models produced are unequivocal, and moreover, they have strong predictive utility particularly with respect to lap dancing and stripping. Our data indicate that the pathways to stripping and lap dancing may differ considerably from those that lead to prostitution and escort work. We also acknowledge that our measurement of the relationship between financial hardship, mental health and involvement in sex work is indirect because we are correlating respondent measures with whether they know someone else working in the sex industry. There is obviously an urgent need to replicate and extend these findings in other areas of the UK using larger samples that will arrive at a more precise estimate of the magnitude of this social problem.

Sadly, participation in the sex-work industry by students is predictable based on what we already know about the relationship between sex work and economic hardship. Globally, we witness the trafficking of women from poorer nation states frequently affected by armed conflict to highly developed nations solely for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Despite any caveats that might be attached to the findings we report here, the dangers and risks confronting students who work in the sex industry cannot and should not be ignored even in this wider context. The tragedy here is that the education system should in theory be providing an opportunity for self-improvement and a real opportunity to *transcend* economic deprivation. Moreover, unlike economic collapse and armed conflict, alleviating student debt is a relatively easy problem to solve.

Although student participation in the sex industry should not be considered surprising, given the prevalence of financial problems, a recent review of mental health issues facing UK students contained no acknowledgement that students are undertaking sex work in response to financial hardship, and actually downplayed the role of financial hardship in exacerbating psychological distress (Olohan, 2004). Olohan, in wishing to emphasise the potential to enhance student well-being, no doubt believes that government policy on higher education funding is not amenable to change and therefore is not an available avenue for intervention: we strongly disagree based on the current findings. Financial hardship needs to be included along with alcohol problems, prior sexual abuse, eating disorder and mental health, as potential means for practical intervention. We note that the figures we obtained

for the prevalence of eating and alcohol problems as well as a history of past sexual abuse are themselves alarming and should be the focus of both further research and support for students. That said, it is hard to imagine that alleviating financial hardship is not possible in the UK, given its status as one of the richest countries in the world.

We note that there has been criticism of the lack of objectivity demonstrated by observers and researchers involved in the sex-work area; in particular, that of the radical feminist position that female sex workers are victims of a patriarchal oppression. However, it is equally unobjective to argue that sex work is actually an empowering and positive experience for women (Agustin, 2004; Wahab & Sloan, 2004) because there is little evidence to support the view (Hunter, 1993; Benson & Matthews, 1995; Raymond *et al.*, 2001, 2002). Moreover, the argument that the sex industry can be simply compared to any other economic activity is naïve (Wolffers, 2004). The reality is that sex workers face many dangers that are not faced in other types of 'employment'. Barrett (1997), for example, has pointed to the dangers of criminality and drug abuse that face students entering the sex industry, whilst Raymond *et al.* (2001) found that sex workers were paid more if they agreed to sex without a condom. Forty-five per cent of the women in their sample stated that they risked abuse if they insisted on using protection during sex. Although most sex-work establishments have rules of obligatory condom use by all customers, actual use was found to be negotiable between the client and sex worker, thereby risking HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. A cross-cultural study conducted with prostitutes from five countries showed that 80% of the women had suffered physical violence from clients and pimps along with subsequent negative physical as well as psychological health effects (Raymond *et al.*, 2002). Clearly, on the basis of this kind of data it is difficult to claim that sex work is positively experienced and enjoyed by a majority of service providers.

Based on the evidence presented above, it is clear that further research is urgently needed to understand the scale of student involvement in sex work in the UK and to clarify our understanding of the factors which influence the decision to engage in sex work and the motivations of student sex workers. What is the ultimate trade-off between the advantages and disadvantages of participation in sex work by students? What are the costs and consequences of engaging in sex work for personal, social and family relationships, academic attainment and mental health? We do not as yet understand the short- and long-term consequences of organising a higher education system in such a way that the sex industry becomes a major beneficiary.

What steps are higher education institutes themselves taking to recognise the problem? Stakeholders in UK higher education (universities, the National Union of Students, the government) have so far shown little inclination to recognise or address the problems that are on their doorstep. This must change if progress is to be made. The question for universities and for the National Union of Students, is why their clientele are increasingly turning to employment which entails the provision of sexual services to a paying public with the potential cost of psychological and physical harm to themselves. This issue appears to be of little value to these

organisations from an economic vantage point, or at the very least is viewed as a potential source of negative public relations. Of course providing sexual services in order to obtain a 'good education' is not a marketing dream either for higher education institutions or the National Union of Students, both of which function as businesses that profit from the existence of a sizeable student body.

## Addendum

We are continuing with our endeavours to conduct research in this area and would welcome constructive comments on pursuing this work.

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