Abstract

Despite conclusive research, higher education institutions are reluctant to acknowledge that students are engaged in the sex industry. Drawing on findings from the first cross-national study with sixteen student service providers in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA), we share student service providers' concerns about the prejudice students engaged in the sex industry face and the potential negative impact this has on their wellbeing and education at university. While recognizing the socio-structural factors that shape student engagement in the sex industry, as well as the stigma associated with it, participants nevertheless understood student sex work to be an unspoken matter at university. Applying the spiral of silence theory, we further an understanding of the oppression students engaged in the sex industry face and urge universities to make good use of policies such as Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion to safeguard all students against prejudice and discrimination.

Key words: Sex industry, students, higher education, silence, prejudice, oppression.

Student Service Provider Perspectives on Student Sex Work: Stigma, Prejudice and Silence

Introduction

Between 2013-2015 The Student Sex Work Project (TSSWP) carried out a large-scale study on the topic of Higher Education (HE) and student sex work. The project's survey was completed by 6,773 students and found approximately 5 percent of students in HE in the United Kingdom (UK) were engaged in sex work, with approximately 22 percent having considered it (Sagar et al., 2015a). Similarly, a survey with 4,386 students in Germany found approximately 7 percent of students had engaged in sex work (Ernst et al., 2021). Indeed, students have been reported to engage in sex work in countries across the globe including Australia (Lantz, 2007; Simpson & Beer, 2022), the USA (Jones, 2022; Stewart, 2021) and Canada (Brown & Buckner, 2021).

Research finds students enter the sex industry for financial reasons, underscoring contemporary HE's expensive price tag with inflated tuitions (e.g., Ernst et al., 2021; Lantz, 2005; Roberts, 2022; Sagar et al., 2016). Motivations also include students being curious about the industry and seeking sexual pleasure (Sagar et al., 2016), adventure, and fun (Ernst et al., 2021). Therefore, while motivations may vary, the concerns and reservations amongst academics and students about HE staff being able or willing to support student sex workers are a constant feature of the expanding portfolio of research of student sex work in the UK and USA (Brown & Buckner, 2021; Cusick et al., 2009; Jones & Sanders, 2022; Stewart, 2021).

The Service Provision Gap

Highlighting a gap of service providers' opinions, the TSSWP carried out a small-scale study to explore HE staff responses to students engaging in sex work (Sagar et al, 2015b). Findings evidenced a lack of specific provisions or policies in place in HE. Further, TSSWP

found that although student service providers had a poor understanding of the complexities of student sex work, they expressed a need for training and policy/guidance from their institutions to address the deficit in knowledge and institutional guidance. As a result, TSSWP developed training delivered to over 1000 HE professionals, sexual healthcare providers, and law enforcement in the UK (Jones & Sagar, 2022).

Despite the USA lacking the same kind of student unionisation, the USA has made legislative changes in relation to the broader sex industry. For example, Maine adopted a partial criminalisation model (Heal, 2023), and other states have repealed prostitution laws that prohibit loitering in a public place for the purpose of sex work (Vielkind, 2021). However, a decade on from Sagar et al. 's research, few universities have established policies to protect student sex workers from discrimination and harassment. Trueman et al. (2022) drew on the TSSWP research in 2019 and developed additional training and policy for HE professionals in the UK. The development of the toolkit gave rise to severe criticism from organisations like Nordic Model Now! (NMN) (2022a). According to their website, NMN describe themselves as a feminist grassroots women's group based in the UK campaigning for the criminalisation of the purchase of sex. NMN (2022b) denounced the toolkit, going so far as to state the toolkit 'grooms young women to consider prostitution as a viable stream of income' and promoting it was 'an attack on women and girls.'

This kind of challenge is nothing new for academic researchers who illuminate topics like sex work, as they negotiate their way through political paradigms of empowerment/agency versus objectification/oppression (Connelly, 2016; Simpson, 2022). Researchers have reported a range of hostilities, including stigma by association (Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Jones & Sagar, 2022; Irvine, 2014). While some academics have borne the brunt of critical onslaught

their employers have stayed quiet furthering a disservice to their students. We accept this is a provocative topic for universities, and particularly so given engagement is linked to issues which are very close to home such as rising tuition fees, however this article suggests that remaining silent might not be an option for universities going forward.

Accessing Services

While researchers agree students deserve access to student services, there are different explanations for inaccessibility of services in HE settings. For example, Stewart (2021) points to assumptions amongst student sex workers that HE staff are unaware, uncaring, or unwilling to provide support. Stewart's (2021) academic paper used a conceptual framework of institutional betrayal documenting student sex workers' opinions on how and if staff, faculty, and administration could or cared to provide appropriate support. The overall agitational message of the paper excludes student support services in student sex work research. While Sagar et al. (2015b) found student service providers often lacked awareness and confidence, but desired to be aware and wanted training and to offer appropriate support (Sagar et al., 2015b). These positive findings were tempered with concerns about students' requirements to uphold the reputation of the universit*y*, as well as a potential fitness to practice conflicts required by vocational degrees (nursing for example). Both concepts are undefined thus vague enough to target students who engage in sex work, should the institution/profession decide a student's conduct is morally questionable. Most universities remain silent on issues of student sex work potentially furthering the research dichotomy that staff and faculty are either uncaring or unprepared but willing and aware of the hardship these students may face.

At the time of writing, few universities have taken the challenge set by Trueman et al., (2022) to make good use of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)[1] and other protective policies to deliver non-judgemental support to students engaged in sex work. Throughout this paper the term student support services is synonymous with student support staff or student affairs professionals [2]. Against this backdrop this article reports findings of a first cross-national study in 2023 with seven HE student service providers from the US and nine from the UK.

Higher Education, Stigma and Silence

Both the UK and the USA command substantial HE fees with student sex work taking place in both countries (Jones, 2022; Stewart, 2021; Trueman et al., 2022). Considering the lack of published student support providers' opinion, the research aimed to better understand current barriers for students in the sex industry to access student support services in HE institutions. It is widely acknowledged that sex workers are judged to have a polluted identity (Goffman, 1963). Goffman's pioneering work has been a consistent feature of the sex work literature with contemporary research showing how stigmatisation, discrimination, and harassment in most countries go hand in hand (Long et al., 2014). These perceptions are also known to be shared by service providers (Underhill et al., 2015), indicating a general attitude toward sex workers that is negative and harmful (Long et al., 2012; Langenbach et al., 2023).

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's (1974) renowned mass communication theory, the spiral of silence, explains how social norms solidify and become dogma. According to the theory, when a morally laden issue or topic of debate is presented, individuals will scan their environments and

[1] The UK and USA use different EDI terms. The UK sanctioned Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in 2010. The USA uses the term Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and it is not a law but a framework. EDI will be a shorthand for both.

[2] This is a USA and UK cross-national authorship and participant pool. Student support staff, student service providers, and student affairs professionals are interchangeable.

identify the dominant opinion. If disagreeing creates a threat of isolation, and if the individual fears isolation, they will retreat and fall silent. Keeping silent about one's opinion is a mechanism to avoid isolation from the group. In this way, the dominant opinion prevails informing and shaping social norms. Given the stigma associated with sex work, the communal university setting, and the spiral of silence's concern with moral/value laden issues, this theory offers an appropriate theoretical framework. We argue the silence surrounding student sex work in HE perpetuates stigma resulting in prejudice and oppression.

Research Design and Methods

This cross-national study hypothesised that students engaged in sex work from two different nations, on different continents, might face similar issues of stigmatisation, discrimination, and harassment in HE. A key driver of the project was to identify any similarities and differences in the student support available/provided at university to students engaged in the sex industry in the UK and USA. The project therefore focused on exploring several interconnected aims. Firstly, given the lack of progress in terms of policy development within HE, we revisited student support service providers' perspectives on student sex work to better understand their levels of awareness about the topic. Secondly, we explored student support services opinions on how fellow staff, university, and society generally look upon student sex work. Lastly, the researchers wanted to build on the work of Sagar et al (2015b) in the UK, to explore whether responses may show a noticeable difference between the UK providers where more research and training is available versus the USA providers who likely would not have received training on student sex workers given the absence of research-based training (Lancaster & Sagar, 2025). Two universities took part in the study with which the researchers had professional contacts.

In taking a small-scale exploratory study approach, the researchers recognized that the findings might be considered as localized (Lincoln and Guba 1985) yet, nevertheless important in terms of engendering social change – something often called for within the field of those researching sex work (Ferris et al., 2021). Moreover, the only previous study that explored university staff perspectives and experiences in relation to student sex work by Sagar et al. (2015) also adopted a qualitative approach. Other studies that have examined HE student support/affairs administrators experiences of supporting marginalized students through an EDI lens in the USA have also adopted a qualitative/narrative approach (Broadhurst et al., 2018). By adopting a qualitative approach, the researchers also hoped to achieve findings that were informed by the participants' experiences and gave them the opportunity to explain their experiences in a narrative form. Qualitative methodologies can help with an understanding of organizational power and has the potential to influence decision making in relation to policy and practice towards the goals of equity and social justice (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007).

Data Collection and Sampling

Ethical approval was granted by both universities. The researchers identified institutional leads for student affairs/services to promote the research through various teams. Student service providers were emailed and invited to participate in the research. The participants were self-selecting. Table 1 represents limited demographic details of the participants in the study. It identifies the anonymized participant by pseudonym and country of employment within the HE sector. The length of time the participants had worked in student facing roles ranged from one to 39 years. All participants were involved in services focused specifically on supporting students including Student Information, Financial Hardship and Aid Advisor, Disability, Student Support, Student Welfare, Student Success, Admissions, Career Service, Senior Leader in campus

services, and Transcription. Other details about the demographics of the participants have been withheld to protect their anonymity given the identification of the research sites and the small sample (Colosi et al., 2019). Table 1 shows nine participants in the UK and 10 through 16 the USA.

Adopting a small sample approach allows for deeper conversations within limited time constraints (Jones, et al., 2022) – therefore in this case given the exploratory nature of the project, the researchers were content with the sample. A semi-structured interview approach permitted the researchers to stay focused on the research protocol while still giving both the researchers and the participants the opportunity to explore other pertinent ideas participants may have presented. This served as a springboard to further enhance understanding of the topic (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interviews took place between October and December 2023. Prior to meeting participants, the researchers formalized a semi-structured protocol consisting of eight main questions and five sub questions (see table 2 as an example).

Trustworthiness, Positionality and Data Analysis

Trustworthiness is a key component in evaluating the worth of any study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). For Broadhurst et al. (2018, p. 392), adopting the principles of Denzin & Lincoln (2008), "trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability". However, whilst there is a recognition that in quantitative methodologies, trustworthiness can be evaluated through the scrutiny of data gathered through randomized control trials for example (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017), there is an ongoing discussion about how trustworthiness can be auditable in qualitative studies. There seems to be collective agreement that trustworthiness within the qualitative field can be explained through critical reflection of matters such as bias and positionality of the researchers and a clear explanation on the

methodological approach and analytical process of examining data sets (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017; Broadhurst et al., 2018).

Both researchers who conducted the data collection, had a longstanding commitment to supporting the rights of student sex workers. Within the field of sex work studies, taking an activist -academic stance has been a methodological approach and shown to enhance the experiences of those taking part in academic research and also help academics garner legitimacy and trust from sex work communities – something key to achieving collective social change (Jones, et al., 2023; Ferris et al., 2021). Both researchers accepted that their experiences of researching sex work had shaped their views of it as a phenomenon and also how society, in the case of student sex work, HE institutions responded to it. However, in developing the project, the researchers had not worked together and had differing academic experiences – for example Sagar had a longstanding reputation of conducting qualitative research on the topic of sex work whereas Lancaster was newer to the field. Therefore, they spent the best part of two years getting to know each other and exploring and challenging their individual positionalities. Jones had a longstanding partnership with Sagar and was Co-Co-Principal Investigator on TSSWP - whilst not involved in the data collection, Jones acted as a critical colleague to Sagar and Lancaster and supported the reflexive thinking of both researchers. Jones also supported the sense checking of the interpretation of the findings and the writing of this article. In taking a critical reflexive approach the researchers brought their conscious biases and experiences to the design of the project and their analysis of the data – something that is recognized as a valid qualitative approach (Broadhurst, et al., 2015; Sandelowski,1986).

Braun and Clarke Thematic Analysis

Widely accepted in the social sciences as a leading approach in analysis methods and unbound by a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach offers clear, distinct nonlinear steps to refine large chunks of qualitative data to specific themes, i.e., patterns in the data that are important or interesting to address the research. Much more than simply summarizing the data, a good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of it (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Following the interviews, the transcripts were anonymized and saved.

The researchers first became familiar with their own data set, annotated, coded, before looking at the data as a whole. Several meetings took place and both systematically evaluated the larger data set completing a broad sweep for similarities and differences between participants in the USA and UK identifying themes based on the research aims. Following this period of immersive data familiarization and discussion both synchronous and asynchronous about interesting features of the data (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017), coding took place producing themes. In identifying the codes and themes and ensuring the trustworthiness of the data, the authors then followed a scientific and consistent approach based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of analysis: (1) become familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes (3) searching for themes (4) reviewing themes (5) defining themes, and (6) the write-up.

Applying this approach began with the researchers looked at the data to highlight numerical values representing how often and to what degree participants stated responses to each question. Following the Braun & Clarke model, the data was then annotated with initial inclinations to become fully immersed within the participants' words. Identifying relevant aspects of the evidence, the researchers then started the third step of arranging data and scanning for initial overarching themes. Once potential themes were identified, related data was organized

by similarity and categorized further by subthemes. The researchers continued to review the categories and refine, combine, or separate the data so that each theme was specific to the evidence it represented – unrelated data was then discarded (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After reviewing the categories, the researchers started to name and define each theme. This ongoing analysis was often recursive. Lancaster and Sagar would repeat steps to ensure a narrowing of the data into more specific descriptions of the larger transcript data. During this process some themes started to change from semantic to latent (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Much of the initial organization included explicit data such as assumptions about sex work in society however, as the analytical process evolved, the data was interpreted into meanings and implications.

Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations that should be noted (Broadhurst et al., 2018). The participants in this study were self-selecting. This may suggest that they were particularly interested in talking to the researchers on this topic. It is impossible to know what the views of those less interested or unwilling to talk to the researchers were on the topic of student sex work. Given the sensitive and controversial nature of the topic, it may be that those working in student support/administrative did not come forward because of a fear of 'stigma by association' discussed earlier and the potential this may have on career progression – something reported by others studying in this field (Hammond & Kingston, 2014; Jones & Sagar, 2022). Another possibility may be the previously mentioned ideological belief that supporting students in the sex industry may be perceived as condoning the sex industry. That said, the participants who took part provided a depth of data that ensured the findings are trustworthy and representative of the views of staff in the two university sites.

It is also important to recognize the similarities and differences within the UK and USA in terms of their approaches to the topic of sex work and higher education. For example, while both the UK and USA are neoliberalist countries with expensive education systems, there are multiple cultural differences, some known and unknown to the researchers (e.g. free access to the welfare state in the UK, the strongholds of nationalism and religion across the Bible belt in the USA). Still the patterns in the data are startling. These variances aside, the similarity of participant opinions and observations provide an important indicator of the challenges students engaged in sex work face globally within universities.

Findings

It is worth noting here that the themes captured something important about the data (see Table 3). For example, a key theme initially titled 'the unspoken' (later refined into a theme titled 'silence') developed from patterns in the data related to the wide-reaching silence around student sex work in student support providers' support teams, in HE generally, across society more broadly. The spiral of silence theory further contextualized our thematic findings by underscoring the variable of social exclusion as the major force cementing this silence. The spiral of silence process shows empirical support for issues with a moral component, or value-laden issues 'by which the individual isolates or may isolate himself in public' (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). According to Noelle-Neumann it is the moral or normative element that allows public opinion to assert the threat of isolation. We report primarily on three key themes: Understanding Stigma, Prejudice and Oppression, Silence and Neglect. Additional themes are discussed elsewhere in relation to training and improving professional responses (Lancaster & Sagar, in press).

Understanding Stigma

A common theme across the data indicates 13 out of 16 participants did not have experience supporting student sex workers. Two UK participants (Anthony & Jermey) completed training on student sex work in HE. Two from the UK (Sally & Anthony) reported supporting student sex workers and one from the USA (Steve). Additionally, two UK (Katherine & Jermey) participants reported supporting sex workers prior to HE employment in different professional roles. They noted this experience increased their confidence, however, they still felt unsure how to respond in HE. Thus, the majority of opinions expressed during the interviews were shaped by social constructions of sex work, and some of their assumptions were also biased. For example, Silvia (USA) explained their concerns which included how sex workers "…often get pulled into sex trafficking."

Participants talked about the shame and embarrassment students might feel if they were found out, but they were also able to offer explanations of how these fears and concerns were generated. Beth (UK) believed students might be judged because of stigma and because sex work is perceived to be "immoral" and "seedy", adding this is because of "a lack of understanding". Steve (USA) spoke of social stereotyping and "ideas of sex work, you know being classified as sluts or whores or anything of that nature". Another spoke of how society views students engaged in sex work as "trying to make easy money…not wanting to work…not a good representation of university…not looked at in a positive light..." and added such judgements were made with "no understanding either" (Quinn, UK).

Regarding other possible negative associations prevalent with perceptions of student sex work in society participants named "drug addiction" (Katherine, UK), backgrounds of "social deprivation" (Sally, UK; Anthony, UK), "laziness" and "stupidity" (Amanda, UK), as well as being unprepared to "take up other work" (Quinn, UK), or alternatively making money when

they do not need it (Maureen, UK; Anthony, UK) and "looked at it and in a negative light" (Janet, USA). Of course, as noted, the reality is motivations vary and include curiosity/pleasure, (Sagar et al., 2016) and adventure/fun (Ernst et al., 2021), and there is little evidence to suggest student sex workers are drug addicts from deprived backgrounds. Indeed, research suggests sex work is being taken up by the middle classes (Bernstein, 2007) and students are known to work in the industry because it can provide a higher income than other jobs (Ernst et al., 2021). Felicity (UK) however explained society was unlikely to reconcile the image of a student with that of a student sex worker:

> I don't think this is what the general public would like in the same boat – a university student engaged in sex work? I think this is not two terms that would necessarily go together. And I think the general perception of individuals engaged in sex work is negative…not positive…therefore would feed into the perception of students.

Beth (UK) went so far as to suggest that having a sex worker status would result in complete detachment from student status, "I'm not sure they would see them as a student actually."

Prejudice and Oppression

All participants had concerns about prejudice students engaged in the sex industry were likely facing in HE which was seen as emanating from different sources.

Peers

Sally (UK) spoke of negative stereotypes resulting in peers seeing students engaging in sex work as an "interesting taboo" and how students can "easily become ostracised by the student community" where engagement becomes known.

Patrick (USA) also spoke about how students pursuing nursing degrees might use knowledge of student engagement in the sex industry as leverage against a fellow student,

explaining that because it is taboo it "tends to be used as an offensive". Female students' hostility toward other female students who work in the sex industry is also reported in the literature (Long et al., 2014). In all these scenarios, student sex workers should be afforded protections of institutional policies designed to safeguard all students. However, to derive any such benefit, a student's identity as sex worker is also likely to become known (through disclosure or allegation), and this brings forth the risk of other prejudice from within HE which are discussed below.

Support Services and the Institution

A further theme that emerged from the data suggest that whether a student receives a non-judgemental response was perceived to be a lottery. Steve (USA) stated where this was the case, "some of the worries [students have] can become a reality for them, depending on the individual staff member they talked to". This was further emphasised by Anthony (UK):

> "I can't promise that all student support are all the same, I just can't. Some people are flawed by disclosures to the point where they make decisions that aren't appropriate shall we say…this is a bad side to this".

Participants spoke of misunderstandings about sex work, bias and judgement, the potential lack of confidentiality, different responses on different programmes of study, and visible reactions to disclosures because "…people's faces tend to speak louder than their words" (Steve, USA).

It was understood that students engaged in sex work very likely suffered prejudice within HE. Anthony (UK) (one of the few participants with experience supporting student sex workers) believed students were right to fear "very quickly [a staff member could] turn it into something that it absolutely isn't." Sally (UK) also summarised their apprehensions about the forms prejudice might take believing students:

> …might not to be deemed fit to study or fit to practice or mature enough or sensible enough to be able to engage in studies, or reliable enough or trustworthy enough…not able to complete their academic study or engage in an active way.

Fitness to practice was also raised by Quinn (UK) as a potential barrier to a career:

> …[they] worry they are 'going to be kicked off their course…they get it drummed into them things like 'oh to be a nurse and get on the register you have to have good health and good character', and they think people will judge them and consider them not to be of good character…which is really sad.

Sagar et al. (2015b) reported how some HE staff believed engaging in sex work might have disciplinary repercussions. However, the findings in this current study showed a strong desire to adopt a caring and inclusive approach. All participants stressed the need to be supportive and explained wide ranging impacts emanating from experiences of oppression, including feeling: "weighed down" (Silvia, USA), "less worthy" (Felicity, UK), "a lesser student" (Richard, USA), "isolated" (Quinn, UK) and "ostracised" (Sally, UK). All of which impacts negatively on health and wellbeing.

A further theme suggested by the data notes that participants shared their concerns about students likely being anxious, worried, and stressed, with low mood, depression, mental health issues. They also explained the impact this could have on a student's ability to trust HE services, access/reach out for support, engage with the institution, and complete programmes of study. Most of these concerns and impacts are experienced by sex workers generally, where social stigma can cause them to distrust/disengage from support services leaving their health and safety at risk (Benoit et al., 2018). In recent years, research has also confirmed how the stigma experienced by students engaged in sex work makes them reluctant to access support services in

HE (Sagar et al., 2015b; Ernst et al., 2021; Stewart, 2021; Jones, 2022; Simpson & Beer, 2022; Trueman, 2022) with academics ironically continuing to argue students engaged in sex work should feel able to access support services afforded to all students in HE.

Silence and Neglect

Eleven participants believed student support services did not have a good understanding about students engaged in sex work, with another two doubting they did and a further two believing only student support services did but not staff across the wider university.

Too Taboo to Talk About

Ten participants believed student sex work was silenced in HE because the issue was controversial/taboo. Despite a career in HE over twenty years, Silvia (USA) shared how they had "...never actually seen or heard of anyone reaching out to offer support to students [engaged in the sex industry]." Steve (USA) recalled "...we've never personally talked about it at a professional level here...." While Quinn (UK) believed people in HE actually "did not want to talk about it." Patrick (USA) also suggested that the "embarrassment and [reluctance] to talk about sex and how you talk about it" was accompanied by "an underlying assumption that [students] wouldn't do it." By not talking about it, HE institutions are better able to insulate themselves and even disconnect from reality and this was raised by four Participants. However, very importantly, all 16 of our participants wanted to talk about it. For example, "I think it's taboo for us to talk about…we should be able to talk about uncomfortable things" (Amanda, UK).

Institutional Fear

The idea that students engaging in the sex industry poses a reputational risk for the university was not lost on our Participants for example: "I do wonder about the university

thinking about their reputational risk. And therefore, we don't talk about it, it's not happening – that kind of thing…I think that's probably a key factor from an organisational perspective" (Maureen, UK). Sally (UK) also explained: "...to address something then there is the idea that you are suggesting it's an issue. And if you are suggesting it's an issue then what are the general public going to think about this institution?" The understanding that students engage in the sex industry is too controversial to acknowledge because it might damage the reputation of the institution features in student sex work discourse (Cusick et al., 2009; Hammerschlag, 2016; Roberts, 2007; Sagar et al., 2015b). As discussed earlier, only two UK Participants received training on students engaged in sex work. Furthermore, given HE has provided training on a range of other issues, for most participants who had not had training on student sex work, the topic is not one that is merely overlooked, it is neglected:

> I think it's something that isn't addressed and talked about…when you think about how much training and development and also awareness raising in terms of other areas maybe around sexuality, gender, faith even, and sexual exploitation and lots of other things actually have far more time given to them than sex workers. (Maureen, UK)
>
> …nobody trains us on any of that…we get sexual harassment training…Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) training [US federal law protecting students' education information] and sometimes Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) training [US federal law protecting patients' health information], but you never get like how to deal with students engaged in sexual profession. (John, USA)

> …there are other things you know like debt, gambling, budgeting, and that type of thing [but] I haven't heard about it…we discuss a lot of different issues…and I haven't heard it mentioned. (Katherine, UK)

Staff are clearly being left in the dark and it is easy to see why the Participants might believe the topic is "hidden" (Beth, UK). As a result, Richard (USA) stated: "...the university as a whole…maybe even many institutions, [doesn't] have a real good grip on what it is our students are dealing with when they do work in those environments."

University Status

The lack of understanding leaves students engaged in sex work outside of university protections. According to Trueman et al., (2022) there has been a rise in discriminatory practices against student sex workers, despite EDI frameworks universities profess to adopt. And while the EDI agenda could provide much needed protections for these students, our Participants shared with us their experiences and opinions on support provided by EDI policy which they believed was vague and which did not include students engaged in the sex industry. For example, Stephanie (USA) deemed EDI policy too narrowly focused: "Diversity and inclusion to me right now, it focuses mostly on gender issues and racial issues…maybe that should [be investigated] …especially with diversity. Diversity is diversity." And Amanda (UK) explained, "I have gone to so many EDI sessions and I haven't made the connection".

As Trueman et al. demonstrated with reference to pioneering steps taken to adapt its policies which today boasts inclusive, evidenced based policy, promoting non-judgemental and anti-discriminatory approaches, it is possible students engaged in sex work can be "integrated into the governing structures of their institutions" (2022, p. 246). However, as previously noted,

few universities have adopted this kind of formal integration. Part of the problem is perhaps summarised by Richard (USA):

> I think EDI has a place in every organisation and institution…but I suspect that 90% of those institutions and organisations, whether they are private, corporate, public, whatever, that it is not a part of their EDI mission to engage with individuals who are working in sex environments….

A lack of protection also leaves universities wide open to accusations of institutional betrayal because of course, as "brokers of power" (Stewart, 2021, p. 4) it is at the pleasure of the institution whether policies are adapted to include students engaged in sex work, whether staff training is provided (Lancaster & Sagar, 2025) and this is equally true as to whether students are disciplined, harms are not prevented, oppression occurs. It is important to re-iterate every Participant wanted to be better informed, and they aspired to provide non-judgemental support. It seems appropriate to end this section with the words of Jermey (UK) who stated there should be "no prejudice, no stigma, no disciplinary action from the university…it's not what they're doing it's about the support they need".

Discussion

Participants believed that stigma against sex workers is prevalent in society (a feature of academic literature over decades, see Goffman, 1963; Simpson & Beer, 2022). We also know 'stigma is a fundamental determinant of social inequality' (Benoit et al., 2018, p. 458) and it is 'a risk factor for mental health problems and psychological distress' (Hatzenbeuhler et al., 2009, p 1282). Not only did our participants understand the social stigma associated with sex work and its influence on their own perceptions, but they also believe stigma exists in the university, giving rise to prejudice against students engaged in the sex industry. Participants raised serious

concerns about the potential behaviour of peers such as blackmail, the negative power of social media, even students being targeted as sexually available in shared residences. Blackmail, harassment, threats and negative outpouring from social media are known issues sex workers can find themselves facing (Campbell et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2018). Research has also documented challenges sex workers face who are presumed to be sexually available and targets of harassment (Carr et al., 2023; Pheterson, 1993).

All Participants believed stigma and prejudice existed against student sex workers – emanating from peers, student services, the wider institution, from society generally. Every participant wanted to provide non-judgemental services. Despite this willingness, the Participants are working in environments where students engaged in sex work may feel unable to access student support services (Haeger & Deli-Amen, 2010; Jones, 2022; Stewart & Linder, 2023). According to Noelle-Neumann, it is the moral or normative elements of a topic that give rise to the threat of isolation for those with opposing or minority viewpoints.

Within the silence staff can also harbour misconceptions about students engaged in the sex industry such as conflated sex work and sex trafficking but there is nothing in our research to suggest this is the case with students, and research shows this is a common conflation that reinforces the stereotyping of sex work more broadly and gives further support to the need for training that is evidence-informed (Wolf, 2019). Nevertheless, the level to which our participants understood their own biases was remarkable. Continuing silence surrounding students engaged in the sex industry is a barrier to their inclusivity and an enabler of stigma and prejudice. Drawing on the spiral of silence theory, HE staff are likely also experiencing what Noelle-Neumann (1974) named the quasi-statistical sense.

According to Neumann, when people are faced with a controversial topic, they begin to unconsciously assess the distribution of opinions around them. This monitoring can include media coverage, direct observation of one's environment, as well as interpersonal discussions (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). If during this assessment it becomes apparent that a person's viewpoint differs from the dominant opinion, this can cause that person to retreat/shut down/fall silent. And while that dominant opinion might not be a true reflection of reality, it does have the same impact: the minority voice stays silent maintaining the status quo. Similarly, the university carries out its own monitoring, and when faced with negative representations of sex work in media and society generally, it is just as likely to give way to the dominant opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993).

Applying this to the HE environment, we can see the spiralling process taking place, where people who believe there is a need to support students engaged in sex work nevertheless keep quiet. And if we pause to consider theories of stigma by association (Goffman, 1963) and reflect on experiences of researchers whose research was blocked/delayed for being inappropriate/sensitive (Roberts 2022; Simpson, 2022) arguably, they are right to fear social isolation for their opinions. Both large and small-scale studies produce convincing evidence that students engaged in sex work experience stigma resulting in them working in secret, feeling unable to confide in others and unable to access student support (Sagar et al., 2015 a & b; Ernst et al., 2021; Stewart, 2021; Simpson & Beer, 2022). Yet, few universities overtly support students engaged in sex work and / or have actively adapted university policy protections to prioritise their personal wellbeing and safety (Trueman et al., 2022).

The data from this small study leads us to argue that the spiral of silence theory also helps explain why universities, which are keen to protect their reputations, stay silent on the issue.

However, in maintaining an environment where sex work is not acknowledged, the institution is leading a spiral of silence which cascades down to its employees. As a result, there is a lack of awareness and an absence of training or guidance provided to HE employees. Given the keenness of universities to publicise steps taken to support other student issues such as mental health and transgender awareness (Brewster & Cox, 2023; Jones & Sanders, 2022; Martin, 2010), this is a bitter pill to swallow. Still, HE might come under increasing pressure to break this silence as economic pressures continue to grip and put great financial strain on students (Brown, 2023). For example, the plight of medical students in the UK led to a request to the British Medical Council not to penalise students for engaging in sex work (Turner, 2021), and which saw leading doctors voting in their favour (Boyd, 2021).

Implications

While student sex work research is ongoing and sparse there has been a hyper focus on students' perspectives (Lantz, 2007; Sagar et al., 2016; Simpson & Beer, 2022; Stewart, 2021). This study is one of only two to interview student support services on the topic of student sex work and the first to utilize a cross-national approach. Without a more holistic evaluation on all academic levels, it will be challenging to implement and understand barriers to harm reduction approaches. This paper shows a group of participants from the USA and UK willing to improve responsiveness and often understanding the stigma students in the sex industry may face.

Outside of these two student support service studies, poor responsiveness may be largely a matter of being unaware. Unaware of one's own biases and student needs and concerns. Heavily influenced instead by social constructions of sex work. The spiral of silence shows how dominant opinion can be driven and shaped by a few but those few, when left unchecked, due to the silence of others, can turn opinion into dogma creating social norms. In the case of sex work

creating an idea that those in stigmatized employment are in fact dirty (Irvine, 2014) and may deserve the various harms that befall them. In this study one participant made an evocative statement: a female sex worker might feel that it gives a message to the males in her flat, that you know there is this availability. Which isn't the same at all is it? But how do you deal with that then? (Amanda, UK).

This same participant noted that people's discriminatory behaviors cannot be controlled, but within HE mental health, substance use, transgender identity and other trainings are intended to change behavior often by first changing biases and misconceptions. Currently, on our college campuses a student sex worker may choose to single handedly manage threats while potentially risking reputation, safety from peers, possible harassment from faculty supervisors, and academic standing. We are not encouraging students to come forward, we are suggesting, as other researchers have, that college campuses start dissolving stigma in part by reducing the silence that gives harassers and discrimination power.

Some manageable first steps for creating change may include extending universities policies to eliminate discrimination, harassment, and coercion based on employment such as the sex industry. Second, safer channels need to be created for student sex workers to report on campus harassment (Trueman et al., 2022) due to their employment. Creating a penalty free space so students and staff can request appropriate support and have safe spaces to report discrimination on campuses which might be marked with a red umbrella or another sex worker symbol. Third, on campus trainings may be designed to tease out the many sex work misconceptions (Sagar et al., 2015b) and address how to respond to disclosures without "outing" the student. Finally, requesting diverse voices such as staff, faculty, administration, and students into harm reduction measures and research will feed programmatic research hopefully

developing into actionable change with support and guidance from individuals' knowledgeable in their area of student support. This tact is especially necessary when considering the highly stigmatized sex industry. Additionally, we have mentioned EDI policies to offer students in the sex industry protections, however, it is worth noting that the current president of the USA has submitted two executive orders seeking to eliminate DEI positions in government and threatens to remove funding from any public university DEI program (Cochran, 2025). It is timely to consider other protective policies for our students.

Final Thoughts

The findings present an unambiguous view on the challenges students engaged in sex work in the UK and USA may face. Within the data patterns we found an overwhelming concern about the existence of stigma, leading to discrimination and oppression. One major difference between the UK and USA participants was their level of experience and student sex work training. During our interview, when participants reported any training or experience, we asked a follow up question regarding their confidence level to support a student sex worker. On a scale of one to 10 with participants being most comfortable (1) or least comfortable (10) how did they rate their future confidence level. Three of the four UK participants responded with a number. Sally reported a three, Anthony reported a two or three, and Katherine five or six. While Steve (USA) reported a lower confidence level of seven. Potentially due to lack of training and only one student interaction. Yet, all Participants understood the forms discrimination takes, as well as the impacts of oppression on the wellbeing of the student, their academic experience, and potential career path. However, they are working in an environment that appears to have closed its mind and ears to the engagement of students in the sex industry. Drawing on the spiral of

silence theory, we suggest this has left those who want to provide appropriate and inclusive support to students engaged in the sex industry without a voice.

This study finds the usefulness of including more research opportunities and training in the USA and protective policies for all students and staff. Additionally providing safe spaces to open a dialogue about students engaged in sex work, tackling staff bias, removing discriminatory practices, and training staff to ensure inclusivity. Students enter the sex industry for many reasons, often, we know, for financial assistance covering tuition and other student expenses. It can be argued that societies need to create opportunities for equity, reducing the sex industry appeal. Still until social institutions reduce class, gender, and economic disparities we can start in the microcosm of our universities as others have begun. Accountability now rests with the institution itself.

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