

The Launch of the University of Leicester's Student Sex Worker Policy and Toolkit

This is a (fairly rough) transcript of the launch of the University of Leicester's Student Sex Worker Policy and Toolkit event that was held via Zoom on Tuesday 15 December 2020. Some of the greetings and expressions of gratitude etc have been omitted.

At the time of writing, the video recording of the event was available at:

<http://insight.culture-shift.co.uk/higher-education/launching-university-of-leicesters-student-sex-worker-policy-and-toolkit>

Gemma McCall

Hi everyone and welcome to today's webinar, thank you so much for joining us. My name is Gemma McCall and I'm the founder and CEO of Culture Shift, which is the 'tech for good' company behind the development of the 'Report & Support' system. I'm really proud – and humbled, to be honest – to be hosting today's launch of the University of Leicester's new 'Student Sex Worker Policy and Toolkit'.

At Culture Shift, we imagine a world of work and study that is safe, happy, and supportive for everyone, everywhere. Our products empower organisations to tackle harassment and any bullying of all kinds, and allows leaders to activate positive change in their institutions to maintain the culture they want. We are currently working with 60 universities across the UK and Europe to help them protect their culture.

[Housekeeping announcements]

The Student Support Services and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) teams at the University of Leicester have been working together over the past year to produce this sector-leading policy and toolkit to ensure student sex workers are safe and supported. The work has been guided by Professor Teela Sanders, who has been facilitating a national co-ordination group since early 2020, with over 40 stakeholders, practitioners, researchers, and sex work organisations. There are now several regional groups, and the activities at the University of Leicester are now being used as best practice and innovative change. Today we're going to hear from the university's team, as well as a student sex worker and other experts, and then we'll have a Q&A which is open to the whole audience, at the end.

I'm delighted to introduce our speakers:

- Professor Henrietta O'Connor, who is pro-Vice Chancellor for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, and Head of the College for Social Sciences, Arts, & Humanities;
- Prof. Teela Sanders;

- Harriet Smailes, who is a wellbeing case manager (Standing Together);
- Prof. Chris Wilkins, Head of the School of Education;
- Faye McCarthy, on the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion team;
- Jessica Hyer, from ‘Support for Student Sex Workers’.

Henrietta O’Connor

Welcome to the launch event. I’m delighted to open today’s event and to have the chance to talk about this important, sector-leading work. I wanted to begin by thanking Culture Shift for hosting today and we’re really happy to have them with us to talk about the work we have done at the university over the past year to try and support and protect our student sex workers.

We hope that today’s session will give you an overview of our journey with this work, as well as putting this more broadly into the wider context of universities and society. We have speakers today on what students are experiencing, research, and lived experiences – what the university’s journey has been and what we’re able to offer for our student sex workers.

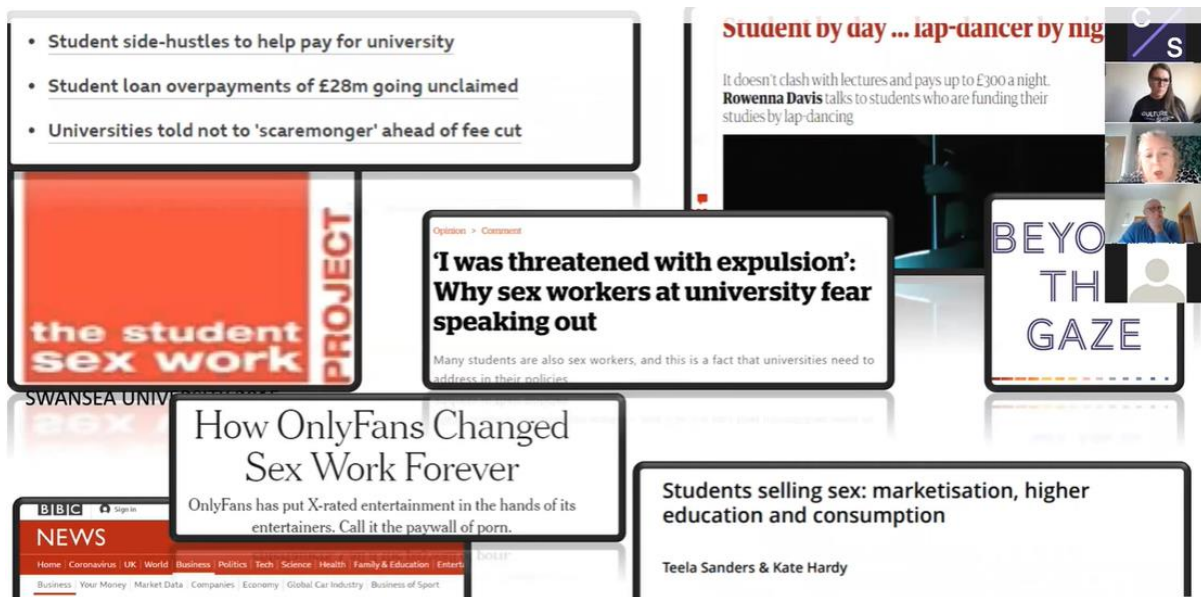
Personally and professionally, I believe all students have a right to access support from the university and local community that’s fit for purpose, I’m so glad we’re working toward a position where student sex workers will be able to receive support in this way. The event today focuses on our work from the past year, but it also marks the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers in ten days’ time.

We know that sex workers are particularly at risk, this intersects with other marginalised groups who are specifically at risk, such as women, trans women and people of colour.

This is one reason why discussing sex work at an organisational level, offering specific support and hosting events like this, are so vitally important. I want to pass now to Professor Teela Sanders, for the broader context around sex work.

Teela Sanders

Referring to that day, International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, which will be on 17th December, I want to flag that up, the broader impact there, but ultimately thinking about the stigma that sex workers face globally, the impact of criminalisation, high levels of stigma and violence and marginalisation that sex workers experience. These serve as a backdrop for which the work, the policy, the practice, has been developed, really trying to bring student sex workers out of the shadows and to the forefront of people’s agendas. We know sometimes it’s difficult to talk about, people have got pre-conceived ideas, they don’t necessarily know anything other than what the media tells them about sex work, so here at Leicester we are trying to make those changes.



I'm just going to give a very brief overview of the research that informed the policy. Student sex work is certainly not new, it's been there for many, many years. I've been researching for twenty years and students involved in all kinds of markets in the sex industry have always been there.

There was quite an important study done by University of Swansea, by Debbie Jones and Tracey Sagar, in 2015, and the project was just in Wales but we do have some headline evidence there to think about the importance of student sex work here. Over 600 students there responded and 5% had worked in sex work and another 20% had considered this.

That was in 2015. There's been lots of changes since then – development in the sex markets, we know that movement online has increased dramatically this year because of people's lives moving online during the pandemic restrictions.

We know increasingly in a recession that these economies grow, so we are expecting sex work to become a place where many people earn money. This is of course not just about female sex work but also male sex work and trans. Also, what the project did was highlight that student sex workers do disclose to academics and to university staff for whatever reason about their sex work, and often staff in universities are not prepared or trained – they don't understand the issues or how to respond. I've really taken that to the working group at Leicester, to really think about how universities should be responding, their responsibilities and duties of care.

So where we are today is using that evidence and knowledge that students will engage in sex work and moving forward we're trying to respond to that; the work we're doing has been informed by lived experience.

[9.10]

Jessica Hyer

I'm a University of Manchester graduate and I'm a student and a mental health support worker and I'm also a former sex worker.

I founded and run Support for Student Sex Workers, a sex-worker-led support organisation that is currently the only one of its kind in the country. We support student sex workers and anyone who identifies with the sex work community, with one-to-one support sessions, group support sessions, careers and academic advice, CV checks and opportunities to build portfolios.

At the University of Manchester where we have the Support for Student Sex Workers' Society, we are also able to offer support for rape allegations on campus, which is a huge victory to me, a survivor, who had little support during my undergraduate studies.

The sex worker community is made up of people from all backgrounds and all walks of life. Not everyone hates their jobs and some people like what they do but they still deserve support. Having been doing this for about a year and a half now, we've never turned a sex worker away. I've realised there's such a wide range of needs for support, and not all of these needs are well understood in society.

It's important that sex workers have somewhere to go that is free from judgement and where people understand. Sometimes I speak with people who just need confirmation that they're not alone. Sometimes I talk with people who let me in on their escapades – because it's nice to have someone to share with. And sometimes I speak with sex workers who have been underpaid or had refusal of payment and just want to know that what has happened to them is rape.

Whilst everyone that comes to me has completely different experiences, I have noticed that the fear that they have nowhere else to go, is universal. Sex work is so badly stigmatised that students are afraid to turn to their universities for support, and this should not be the case.

We need to open up a safe dialogue so that those who need support, feel they will be safe. Many student sex workers have had bad experiences when going for support. Even if it hasn't happened to them, everyone has a friend or knows a story where they've been let down by the system because they are a sex worker.

I was discharged from a prominent rape recovery unit in Manchester because I told them I was a sex worker and I needed help to stop for my mental health. For so long after this, I felt so much shame about this and wasn't able to recover without receiving support and acceptance, empathy and understanding.

Sex workers often feel shame. However, there is no shame in being a sex worker and one of the best things about my job is helping people understand this themselves. At universities, we can support sex workers by offering a safe space, free from judgement where people can ask for help without consequences. Systems in universities have had this in place for other vulnerable groups for years. Student sex workers often feel like they're living a double life, and it's a really special thing when someone admits to you that they're a sex worker, as this is often a really private thing that only a few people know about.

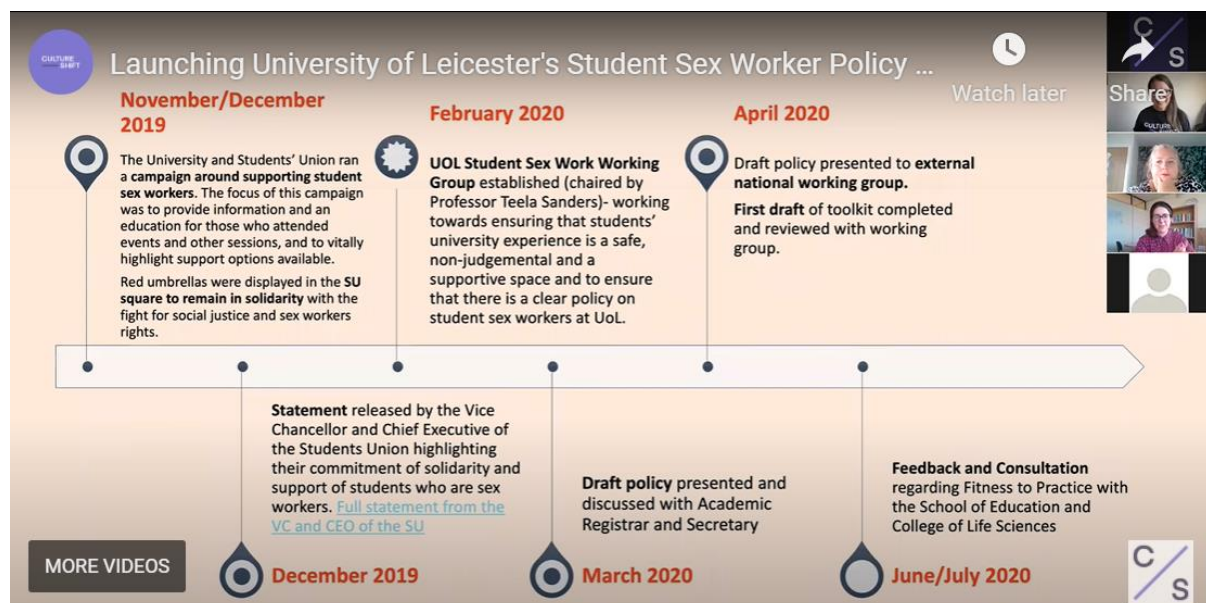
As sex work is becoming more accepted as a viable way to earn a living, the need for support is growing, and the need for universities to demonstrate compassion and understanding of the issues we face and a non-patronising approach to offering support is vital.

Given the state of affairs in the country and the recent results of the pandemic, we are seeing a rise in sex work, which means that there may be people who are unaware how to do sex work safely. It is important for staff to be trained on this in order to protect people who are at risk from this.

[12.40]

Harriet Smailes

As Teela mentioned, the involvement from an academic perspective around sex work has been going on at the university for a number of years but it took a more organisational approach last November/ December. I'm going to talk about where this work came from and also the involvement of Standing Together, the university-wide initiative to tackle unacceptable behaviours and support any students affected, and hopefully I'll be able to articulate how those areas of work intersect.



We joined forces with the Student Union last year to run a campaign around supporting student sex workers. The Student Union at the time had wanted to do some work in this area, in order to provide information and education in this area for people to start the conversation.

We know that stigma leads to poor experiences, particularly of harassment and violence, and those experiences go unspoken and unsupported. I'm with Standing Together, which is a university wide initiative, but we were very keen on joining forces with the students' union and talking about this collectively, but we didn't want to make the presumption or infer that student sex workers were always going to be subjected to unacceptable behaviours.

As Jess says, there are many sex workers of different kinds, of different backgrounds, and for different reasons for getting into sex work, and of course we don't equate sex work with sexual exploitation. So it was very important to us from the beginning that we didn't equate those things unnecessarily and that we could provide information and education and information about support options should they be needed.

As part of the campaign, we were running it alongside our 16 Days of Activism, which the University of Leicester has marked now for the last four years. So we had it as sort of a theme around that time, particularly looking at sex workers. So red umbrellas were hung from the Student Union ceiling to show solidarity with sex workers and the rights of sex workers.

At that time, we also had a statement released by the Vice Chancellor and by the CEO of the students' union, highlighting their commitment and solidarity to supporting student sex workers. Those statements can be found on our website.

Soon after the campaign, we established a working group chaired by Prof. Teela Sanders and colleagues from different areas of the institution who we are hearing from in this webinar. That working group had a focus around writing a policy and toolkit in order to support student sex work.

As part of this, the timeline on the screen shows how the team tracked the progress through this, in the hope that it could be used by other institutions and organisations. It shows the steps that we went through and the learning that we took from that. We are happy to elaborate on any of these elements if needed.

Having this collective input into this work was incredibly important and we are able to launch the formal documentation around this and student support will always be a priority in all of this work.

This is why Standing Together are involved in this work – we support students affected by any form of unacceptable behaviour, whether they be a sex worker or not. We work with departments and services across and external to the organisation, in order to provide the best possible support to students.

We also run awareness and engagement activities such as the event last year, and training for staff and students and support for the development of policies and procedures. All of this is informed by the work we do with students on a one-to-one basis.


In terms of the sex work work and the commitment we have at the university fit into all of those categories within Standing Together. We've developed training to go alongside it and we've run events and campaigns, part of the awareness raising in the event we're doing today. And we support in the development of policies and procedures.

We find it important to take that whole organisational approach and also a whole systems approach when looking at a piece of work like this. And often we find with all the work that we do together that it's useful to do that together rather than individual elements in isolation.

So if anyone is joining us from a university, students' union or organisation who wants to do something similar, this work could be replicated going forward.


That gives you an idea of where the work started from, how the working group was established and how we've been able to develop the policy and toolkit, which we'll go into later in today's session. So you will be hearing from me again and we will be going through the support element in more detail later on. But thinking about it from a governance perspective, and how you might want to do similar work in your institution.

[19.39]



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at Leicester

- The EDI Team provide advice, support and guidance for University staff and students on all aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Our focus is to foster an inclusive learning, working and research environment where all students, staff and visitors are treated with dignity and respect.
- Other areas of the University whose remit covers EDI, some examples: Student and Academic Services areas e.g. AccessAbility Centre.



The diagram illustrates the structure of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) team and its various activities. At the center is the 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team'. Surrounding this central team are seven interconnected circles representing different areas of focus: Training, Advice & Case work, Charters and benchmarking activities, Forums & Networks, Curriculum, Equality Impact Assessments, and Data monitoring. A dashed box highlights the 'Dignity & Respect at Leicester Policy and Framework' as a central element within the team's activities.

Faye McCarthy

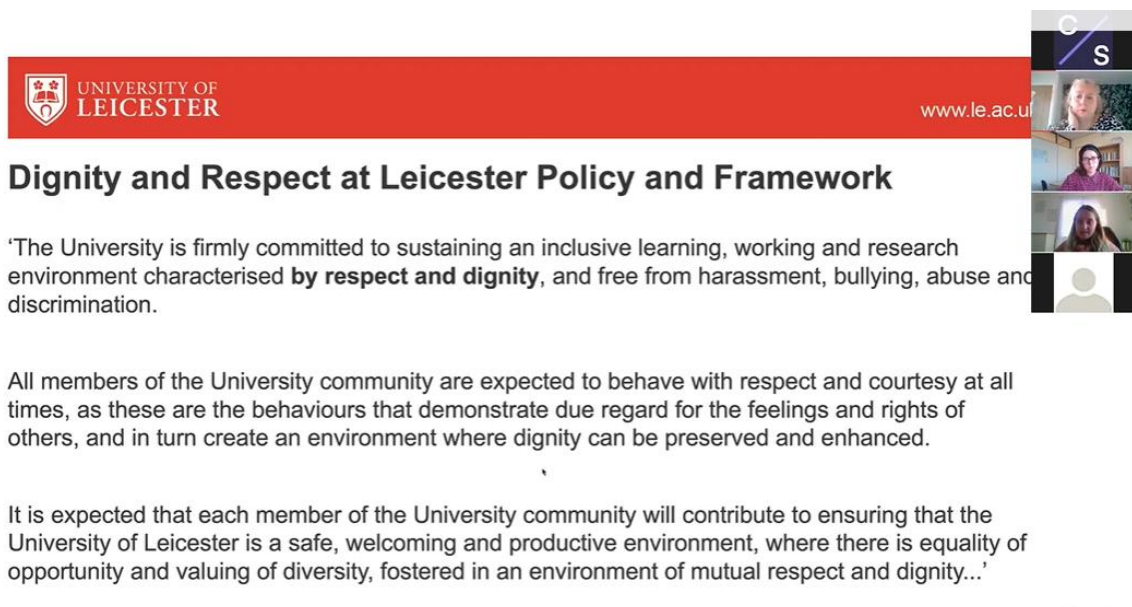
I am the Equality, Diversity, & Inclusion (EDI) officer in the EDI team. I am going to outline the EDI governance at the university and show you where we located the space for the

student sex work work, alongside colleagues and how it aligns with other governance and structures we have.

I fit into a – there are six of us, we provide advice, support and guidance to staff and students at the university in all aspects of their academic [?] life. Our focus is to create a more inclusive learning research-positive environment which is characterised by dignity and respect.

Obviously we are a team but there are other areas of the university that cover the EDI and inclusivity in general as well.

In terms of general work that we do, it's training events, network curriculum, and equality impact assessments, all characterised within our 'Dignity and Respect at Leicester Policy and Framework'. And that's the place where we located the Student Sex Worker Policy and toolkit alongside colleagues about a year ago – as Harriet has identified. And it was led by Teela.



The screenshot shows a presentation slide from the University of Leicester. The slide has a red header with the university's logo and name, and the URL www.le.ac.uk. The main title is 'Dignity and Respect at Leicester Policy and Framework'. Below the title, there are three paragraphs of text. On the right side of the slide, there is a vertical strip showing a video call interface with four participants' video feeds and a microphone icon.

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER
www.le.ac.uk

Dignity and Respect at Leicester Policy and Framework

'The University is firmly committed to sustaining an inclusive learning, working and research environment characterised **by respect and dignity**, and free from harassment, bullying, abuse and discrimination.

All members of the University community are expected to behave with respect and courtesy at all times, as these are the behaviours that demonstrate due regard for the feelings and rights of others, and in turn create an environment where dignity can be preserved and enhanced.

It is expected that each member of the University community will contribute to ensuring that the University of Leicester is a safe, welcoming and productive environment, where there is equality of opportunity and valuing of diversity, fostered in an environment of mutual respect and dignity...'

This Dignity and Respect at Leicester Policy and Framework outlines our commitment around respect and dignity. It identifies unacceptable behaviour and we have a definition document as well. And this is shared across the university all the way from the top. It is an across-university piece of work and it outlines our approach to unacceptable behaviour.

All members of the community are expected to behave with respect and courtesy at all times, and that is the key message.



Link to Student Sex Work Policy

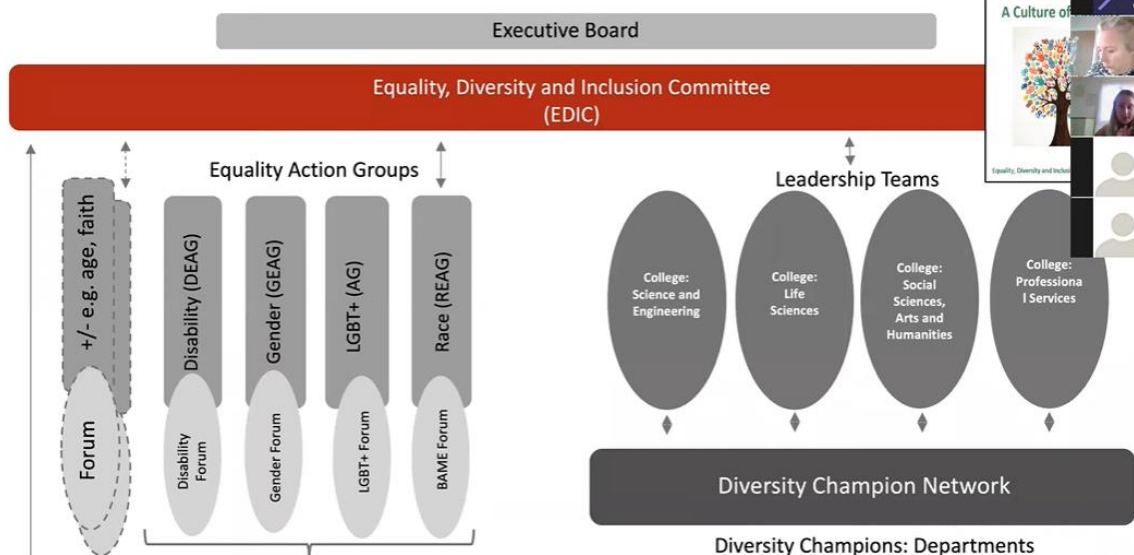
'All members of the University community are expected to behave with respect and courtesy at all times, and operate with a non-judgemental and supportive attitude.'

- [The Dignity and Respect at Leicester Policy](#) identifies some behaviours that are unacceptable which have a clear legal definition and have the ability to be dealt with under the relevant legal framework.
- Possible reported behaviours are those that do not demonstrate due regard for the feelings and rights of others, and do not create an environment where dignity can be preserved and enhanced, as detailed in the [Dignity and Respect at Leicester Policy and Definitions Document](#).

Where there is considerable social stigma directed at sex workers, this group of students are recognised for their potentially vulnerable characteristics and this policy works to protect them

In terms of linking that to the student sex work policy, then... Within that policy we have a statement that says that all members of the community are expected to behave with respect and courtesy at all times and to operate with a non-judgemental and supportive attitude. That is how we linked it within the policy and framework. And we do signpost it throughout the toolkit and policy.

We also outline in the toolkit ways of reporting unacceptable behaviours so that is really clear, and supports for students.



This final slide gives an overview of our governance structure, which you know is a lot, but it just identifies the structure we operate in. We try to work as intersectionally as we can in terms of protected characteristics. And obviously the dignity and respect framework covers this whole governance.

We do have various working groups that operate outside of these networks and the Student Sex Workers' Group is one of these, which feeds back to our EDI committee which is chaired by our vice chancellor. So recognising that EDI is not just our responsibility but across the institution.

[23.44]

Prof. Chris Wilkins

I'll be honest, this was an opportunity to challenge my thinking. When Harriet first came to me – in my role as head of the School of Education, I did find this uncomfortable, and it has given me an opportunity to really think about what our values are and what our duty to our students is, and how that fits in with our responsibilities as gatekeepers for the teaching profession.

What it led me to do is to see the prevailing view in the teacher education community, is one that sees its responsibility essentially to reflect and enact the prevailing values of the teaching profession.

I understand the reasons why we do this – we have to ensure our students show evidence of meeting professional standards for teaching. I think this can lead to a risk-averse approach. And we guide our students essentially to what we think the values are in schools.

For those of you who are not familiar here is an extract from the professional standards that student teachers are required to show.

TEACHERS' STANDARDS (DFE): PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

- Teachers uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour, *within and outside school*, by:
 - treating pupils with dignity, building relationships rooted in mutual respect, and at times observing proper boundaries appropriate to a teacher's professional position
 - having regard for the need to safeguard pupils' well-being, in accordance with statutory provisions
 - showing tolerance of and respect for the rights of others
 - not undermining fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs
 - ensuring that personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils' vulnerability or might lead them to break the law

I started looking at the 'Student Sex Worker Policy' to see what are the key elements of this that the teaching profession might see a problem with? In particular, this idea of teachers

upholding public trust and in particular, as you would expect, an emphasis on safeguarding and not exploiting pupils' vulnerability.

But actually, when I challenge this, I think, "What does this have to do with student sex work? There's no connection here."

I went to the University Council of Education of Teachers, which is our national networking body, nobody had ever raised this before and we had no data on student teachers working as sex workers. The view was that this is seen as a non-issue for student teachers.

I asked for a slot at our annual conference last month to run a little discussion group on this issue, a very small number of people did attend the workshop who were very positive about what Leicester are doing. Outside of that workshop, among people who did not come to the workshop, there was a varying degree of negativity and sometimes hostility [smiling] and I was asked why I was even raising this as an issue.

I think this has reinforced my view, from a teacher-education community we do have a duty as a sector to really examine how we approach this issue of fitness to practice, and to see ourselves as leaders for change. We have to see ourselves as actually using our position in higher education where our role is to challenge orthodoxies. To be drivers for change.

And we have a duty to protect and engage with our students in a non-judgemental way. That means that we are going to have to challenge the profession.

We have to go beyond reflecting and enacting the professional values that prevail in the teaching profession, and see ourselves as actually driving change. There's important work to do in higher education and to reach out into the professions that we serve, professions like social work, nursing, healthcare, medicine, law – all of those higher education sectors where we are providing professional accreditation, we need to work with our professional bodies to raise this issue. That's the real reason why this is such an important policy and as my role as Head of Education that's why I want to give it my support.

I will continue working with colleagues to keep on raising the profile.

[30.19]

Harriet Smailes

We have engaged with other fitness to practice courses at the university around this area and we have been so incredibly lucky with the support that they've shown us and their willingness to challenge themselves personally around this.

And again, this is just the start. We are very much aware that this is just the start of a much longer process and journey for the university around this work. There's more we need to be

doing around training and embedding this policy in different processes – for staff and students – and around culture change.

Ultimately, we are aware and very cognizant of the fact that we are only able to change what is within our community and then hopefully can be role modelling that behaviour and that inclusion and acceptance for other organisations to pick up as well – and hopefully drive some of that change a little bit more actively.

So, there's definitely more to do. Apologies – I've gone off piste a little bit there and got on my soap box. But I think Chris made some really good points and I think just to sort of show our thinking and working around it is quite important.

It's important to say that the focus of the policy why we feel it's so important to be launching it, particularly around the international day against violence against sex workers and within the dignity and respect framework – with that buy-in across the university – is to support our students. That's the fundamental bottom line of it all.

I'm going to cover a few of the support options that are available. I'm going to talk a little bit about how we are using the report and the support system to support in the development of this work. The sharing of the resources around this work as well.

For those of you who are joining us as Culture Shift and report and support licensees, it might be of particular interest to you but for other organisations there might be some things you can take on board.

So as I mentioned earlier, I lead on the Standing Together initiative, which sits within Student Support Services at the University of Leicester. We have specific teams within Student Support Services focusing on different areas of support and well-being, which students can benefit from – all students – and can provide specific advice and guidance. But of course, we do work, as I mentioned earlier, with specialist external services as well if required.

And our students' union has an advice service as well which supports students independently from the university.

So I'm just going to briefly talk you through some of the resources that we have on our report and support system and how we use that.

Generally as a system we use it as a disclosure and referral tool for our students or staff on behalf of students currently – to let us know about any unacceptable behaviour that they've been subjected to. We don't use it as a formal reporting mechanism and I could talk for the whole day if not longer about how we use the system and I'm more than happy to answer specific questions about that if people have those kinds of questions.

But we have a series of multiple choice questions and we do not expect anyone to provide any more information than they're comfortable with and happy to provide on that system.

And likewise, throughout the whole support process and potentially reporting process if they are going to go on to that – either internally or externally – we fully appreciate and understand how students may not want to disclose their sex worker status as part of that. But I want to put the message out there to say that my team and the wider student support services who support students in this way are aware of that and are here to support – irrelevant to any of that.

So we use report and support as a disclosure tool and as a referral mechanism but we also use the support pages and support functions of the tool and the campaigns function as well to provide more information and resources for all of the things that we talk about.

That's currently where a lot of the resources and guidance and support for student sex workers particularly – that's where a lot of those resources are housed. And it's also where our policy and toolkits are now housed – along with some other internal sites and through the dignity and respect framework as Faye's mentioned.

Within those resources we've got two toolkits, which have been developed kind of through that national work and input but also with a specific University of Leicester staff toolkit which feeds into the disclosure guidance that we've developed more centrally through Student Support Services to provide specific guidance around disclosures of sex worker status.

We've also got information and guidance and sign posting there to internal and external specialist support. We've also got a student toolkit on the web pages that will go alongside the policy and sort of be housed all together collectively. Again, to show that holistic approach that we've taken to all of this work.

So, yes, that's report support. That's some of the resources that we have alongside. I am going to wrap up there – unless anyone has got specific questions on how we support students or how we use Report Support, I'm happy to answer those.

I just want to say that we wholeheartedly stand in solidarity with our students in sex work and we do really hope that this work is just the beginning for the University of Leicester but also across the sector.

[36.28]

The Q&A

Gemma McCall: I am going to go to some questions that we've had. I'm going to put the first question to Teela and Harriet.

How can universities go about destigmatising sex work so that students feel that they can go to them for support with no judgement?

Teela Sanders: Thanks. That's a great question. The first thing that we're trying to do – obviously we've made a toolkit with various lived experience put into that. But really it's about education and we know lots of staff don't really know much about sex work, and why should they?

So it is about starting from education, about what the law is, what sex work is, the fact that many students might not necessarily identify as a sex worker, particularly ones working online. So we're really wanting to train staff. Universities have hundreds of thousands of staff across the country and we really think like any of these issues around diversity, a lot of it is about unconscious bias.

It is really starting from that point of understanding what sex work is, the law in this country, and also the experiences of sex workers – as Jess has outlined. We have testament really to the really quite awful experiences of some students in the past – being excluded and expelled from courses, being kicked off courses, blackmail – all kinds of things that people are probably aware of. We know that from the sex work community and people who get in touch with us.

So really it is a point of education of staff – we see that as quite key to this. So really to identify the kinds of things that students might be coming to them with. And that may be something from a really quite serious safeguarding issue or violence at work, for example, or blackmail from people they may be working for – to non-sex work related issues that may affect their experiences – having to hide how they are getting money.

It really is about education of staff.

Gemma McCall: That's really interesting and it leads on to my next question for Harriet. You mentioned in your presentation that it is really important for you to take the whole institution approach, which I wholeheartedly agree with, because you can't just have pockets of good practice.

But given the stigma around sex work and people's biases, as Teela mentioned, was it a challenge to encourage that from the institution?

Harriet Smailes: Yes, is the short answer. I think it's worth noting that this is just the beginning of what we want to do around this area of work. We've engaged specifically with fitness to practice courses for specific reasons as Chris outlined. But we by no means sponsor every single department, academic and professional services – and kind of said, what do you think, how do feel about this.

It's been socialised and communicated at various levels of the organisation but I know that part of Teela's plan going forward, as she's mentioned, is to go out into those different spaces and have that conversation. And we think that's so important, rather than just saying, here's the policy do it.

Just to say, this is what we stand for as an institution. I think it kind of links to the last question as well. I think it's important for staff to recognise what it means for them. So within student support services maybe it's more obvious because this is about supporting students within EDI, it's maybe more obvious within certain courses maybe it's more obvious.

But ultimately student sex workers can be across the board and they could, in theory, disclose their sex worker status as part of anything else as Teela clearly mentioned at any point to any member of staff.

So even just looking at it from that perspective, not a selfish perspective, but for want of a better word, even looking at it from that selfish perspective of, if a student comes to me and discloses this, will I know what to say, will I know where to signpost them to, will I know how to support them as best as I can.

We're not expecting staff to step out of their role into something different or to be something that they're not. We're just expecting to show that supportive, non-judgemental approach to all students. And this is supporting them in doing that – we hope.

So looking at it from that perspective, in terms of what does it mean to me, what does it mean for me. And hopefully looking at it like that might help and I know that's kind of how we want to have some of those conversations moving forward.

But yeah, it is difficult. It will be difficult and like I said this is about a culture change and as you know and as your organisation stands for, Gemma, that doesn't happen overnight and that's why we've been working together for the last couple of years around all of this. And like you said, that whole institutional approach – it's a massive piece of work. We don't underestimate that – but yeah, we're very hopeful and positive about the next steps in that.

[42.17]

Gemma McCall: I'm going to come to some more questions. I'm going to paraphrase a couple of questions that we've had which are on similar themes.

How are you at the university managing the conflict between supporting student sex workers but also protecting them from exploitation – and living up to your duty of care and protecting them from exploitation?

Teela Sanders: The issue of safeguarding is obviously really paramount. We're really taking safeguarding really seriously, but we start from the position – if students don't feel comfortable talking about doing sex work to staff or to welfare – or whoever they encountered at the university, they're certainly not going to come and report issues around safeguarding or issues of violence or coercion or all the other things that people usually associate with doing sexual services.

So I think safeguarding is always there. And obviously we're trained as academics and welfare staff, we've all got safeguarding of adults in our minds and I think that's never away from our minds.

But I think it is a misnomer to think that should be the first thing we talk to students who are doing sex work about. We obviously know and lots of my research has been done around the levels of violence against sex workers, but we also know that's not everybody's experience – there are much safer ways to work, particularly online and people engage in sex work in very different ways.

We know from the Swansea research that often people engage regularly as students so it's not something they will do all the time or be their main way that they get money. So we know it's something that students dip in and out of. So their experiences may be different from what other people may have experienced.

So yes, safeguarding obviously is a priority and that's one of the things we did when we were creating the policy, we consulted with our safeguarding officers and made sure that it was really embedded. So that's not going to be in any way minimised.

And also as reporting and supporting students experiencing any kind of sexual violence, as media on campus campaign shows, sexual violence is a really big issue on campus as well, that's fully integrated into our responses.

Harriet Smiles: Just to add to that if I can as well, I think it comes down to empowerment and informed choice. I think sometimes at the university, we are seen as that *in loco parentis*, that parental kind of figure and actually I think we need to question who we are as an institution to determine what's right and what's wrong for that student to engage in – if we know that they are empowered in that decision making and they are informed in that choice, we need to work with and not supposedly for these marginalised groups across the board – as I think I just touched on a lot of work around oppressed groups and marginalised groups has been going on in universities for a short while now but we need to look at it in a similar way in that we need to work with them and hear from them and use their voices and empower them to make the decisions and we are giving no illusions that things like violence and harassment don't happen within sex work and that's why one of the reasons why it's couched within our dignity and respect policy which has that framework around support and accessing support.

That is our role as an institution to make sure that our students are empowered and are making informed choices for themselves as adults. Most of the time as adults.

Gemma McCall: Here's another question, which I think is quite a straightforward question.

Given that a lot of students start sex work because they are in a financially difficult situation, why don't the universities just exempt students who are involved in prostitution from paying fees?

Teela Sanders: I just think that the universities or any university accountant just raising their eyebrows there. I think this comes back to the law really. I think ultimately if we're in a criminalised situation in relation to selling sexual service even though most things are legal, we're in a criminalised framework so people cannot sign up to be sex workers in the full sense of acknowledging it as a job, as labour.

So I think while we're in that very hiatus quasi-grey legal area around the law, then we can't be expected to think of anything else and then this is an informal economy of which obviously we wouldn't be expecting students to kind of run that kind of economic and legal anomaly. We might be in a situation in the future where decriminalisation exists and then that's a different case but I'm not sure if people will be asking if people are making money as a beautician, however, we should not be telling them not to pay fees really.

We pay. We all pay. We have these conversations a lot in COVID times. Students pay ultimately for quality education. So I think there's a whole other discussion going on there. I'm not sure if Chris has got a comment for that one.

Jessica Hyer: It's just that this can only be seen as a really positive thing. As someone that has done both voluntary sex work and forced sex work, I know that if I had this while I was at university, I would have felt much more safe and I really think that this is most definitely the start of a very positive thing for all sex workers.

Gemma McCall: I'm going to move on to another question, which is a combination of a few similar themed questions.

Some people would say that you have a duty of care to support students to not enter the sex work industry. Why do you think it's important to support students in this situation they're in rather than the one you wish they were in.

Harriet Smiles: Again, it comes down to that choice of students. There's lots of part-time work that I wouldn't have wanted to engage in when I was a student. It's not for me or anybody to say what is right or wrong within that. Sex work is work and if we are confident and competent in communicating that through policies, toolkits, work like this, we can be sure and we can be comfortable in our choice as a university to support students in the choices that they are making.

As with everything, students are able to access support regardless of their part-time work, regardless of their job, and that includes financial support if that's the case. So we would support any student financially or with their mental well-being or if they've been subjected to

any form of unacceptable behaviour – whether that was in relation to sex work or not and whether that was the reason that they went into sex work or not.

So it's about again taking that whole institutional approach, thinking about what your stance as a university is and actually whether that is your decision to be making or whether actually as a university you've just got a duty to educate and that includes this area as well.

I hope that answers it a little bit.

Gemma McCall: Here's another question.

As women and trans women are both at high risk within the sex industry, there is some overlap but some risks/experiences are different, have there been any thoughts or concerns shared or raised by gender or LGBT forums when you were writing this policy and toolkit?

Faye McCarthy: No, there haven't been concerns and I suppose there have been discussions in both of those staff forums and with representation from the student union officers, and the student union was involved in our working group as well so they could then take that back to their student societies if and when necessary. But I suppose that we recognise that and we do reference our protected characteristics and marginalised groups within the policy and the toolkit and our support is available for all, so yes.

It has been discussed and we need to discuss that within the working group as well.

[52.37]

Gemma McCall: I guess it's just a constant, ongoing discussion. Like all of this, I think, everyone, especially within the higher education sector wants to be given the answers and told do this and it will work. And unfortunately, culture change doesn't really happen like that.

We've got to be courageous and be prepared to try new things and learn and be agile and change them if you find something that isn't quite working.

I think that just the sector as a whole is a little bit nervous of working that way but I think it's important if we are going to change the culture that we do do that.

I think this will probably be our last or penultimate question.

Are there any other plans to do another survey which is similar to the student sex worker project one but one that is UK wide to really map sex work throughout the UK and the different types of sex work, different demographics etc specifically among the student population?

Teela Sanders: That is a great question. Generally, the answer is, not at this point in time. But I think obviously there were limitations on just having a survey on Wales. That's just how the funding happened for the team down there.

I've been involved in large projects called Beyond the Gaze about online sex work and students were involved in that and there are others out there. So we do have a decent evidence base.

A couple of caveats on methodology. It's hard to track student sex work involvement because it's so fluid. People on this call may certainly know how it's really hard to track. There are issues of identification. We have got some Home Office survey data from 2019.

I would really like to. I think ultimately, we need to keep up the knowledge and maybe in the future to do something across the four nations would be a really good way to find out new knowledge, new demographics. So we are picking things up like trans, people of colour, migrant students, migrants, overseas students, that's a real area of possible risk. We certainly need to know more about how international students experience sex work.

So there are lots of areas that I think we do need to build up knowledge in. We just need to find a nice funder.

[55.09]

Gemma McCall: This is my parting question.

What support can – obviously you've publicly launched this today and the recording of this discussion will be available to share afterwards – but what support can you provide to other universities looking to take on some of the learnings from this innovative work?

Teela Sanders: I need to give a couple of shout outs. I know Gaynor Trueman, she's been a researcher on this project and she's here today. Gaynor and Jessica and myself are taking forward. We've got money from the ESRC to do an outreach programme to higher education organisations and organisations responsible for students for the next 18 months, starting in January.

We're offering free training, free work around the things we've done, to take people through it, to get the right people round the table. So please get in contact. It is entirely free and supported under the impact acceleration accounts. So we've got lots of things there. So if anyone out there is from a university who is keen – as I said before – there's a national coordination group. We've got various regional groups – in Leeds and Manchester, London, Wales. There are lots of things going on so please do get in contact and we can take the conversations forward.