

# The ‘student sex work’ training: supporting students or political propaganda? You decide.



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If you saw the [controversy on social media](#)<sup>1</sup> recently about Durham University running “sex worker” training for its students, you may be wondering what that training actually consists of. If so, you’ve come to the right place. Read on...

A team from the University of Leicester ran the Durham training and they’ve already delivered the same training to hundreds of students and staff at dozens of other British universities. This is part of a two-year project funded by the ESRC to roll out the University of Leicester’s “student sex work” [policy and toolkits](#)<sup>2</sup> to universities all around the UK.

To find out exactly what the training entails, I spoke at some length to Jim (not his real name) who attended it at one of those universities. But before I tell you about that, I want to take a short detour that illustrates some of the reasons why I, [like so many](#),<sup>3</sup> am concerned by this development.

## Sharking bad. ‘Sex work’ good.

In October 2021, Cerys Turner, a final year student at Warwick University, wrote a great piece for [refinery29](#)<sup>4</sup> on the terrifying phenomenon of ‘sharking’, which she describes as: “a practice whereby older, usually male students use their experience and power to pursue first-year females (often for sex) like a shark would chase its prey: relentlessly, until they give in.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/12/01/universities-are-training-students-to-believe-prostitution-is-a-normal-job/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/05/01/whats-wrong-with-the-leicester-student-sex-worker-policy-and-toolkit/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/revoke-leicester-university-s-student-sex-work-toolkit>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2021/10/10709358/sharking-uni-freshers>

She movingly describes what it's like to be an 18-year-old female fresher thrown into this environment and how hard it is to identify what's really going on and to safely navigate it:

*“As an inexperienced and eager-to-please 18-year-old, I was prime bait, flattered that men – especially older men – found me attractive. Initially I didn't see how sinister it was. Now, in the last year of my degree, I finally see it from the other side.”*

She correctly identifies that while universities claim they won't tolerate sexual misconduct, in reality they do little, if anything, effective to actually challenge the underlying culture that breeds such behaviour and makes it inevitable.

She quotes Dr Fiona Vera-Grey who rightly says that what is needed is a whole-system approach, “not just an online course on consent, which many universities seem to now offer, but complete institutional buy-in to challenging gender norms that situate women as being less valuable than men. This is harder work and takes more effort but ultimately it is the only thing that is going to lead to real, long-lasting change.”

A month later, Turner had an article in [refinery29](#)<sup>5</sup> responding to the controversy surrounding the “student sex worker training” at Durham University. But this time, it seems, she left her critical faculties behind. Take this, for example:

*“It's taken decades of hard work by those employed in the industry and their allies for prostitution even to be considered a legitimate job. Whenever the subject comes up, there is considerable moral panic.”*

Her naivety is betrayed by her belief that women are “employed” in the sex industry and her inability to question who these “allies” might be or in whose interests they are working.

In reality [it's rare](#),<sup>6</sup> if not unheard of, for women in prostitution to be employed on proper employment contracts – even in the megabrothels in [Germany](#)<sup>7</sup> and [Australia](#).<sup>8</sup> And there are shed loads of pimps and punters who style themselves as “allies” with the aim of getting their abusive practices legitimised – and what better way than insisting that prostitution is normal work?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2021/11/10771923/sex-work-at-uni>

<sup>6</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/11/17/handbook-for-universities-4-what-are-we-talking-about-when-we-talk-of-the-sex-industry/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/03/09/german-ex-police-officer-demolishes-common-arguments-against-the-nordic-model/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/07/01/working-as-a-receptionist-in-a-legal-brothel-prostitution-is-anything-but-a-normal-job/>

As to describing concern about legitimising prostitution as a “moral panic” – I guess what you consider a “moral panic” depends on where you’re standing. No doubt there are a lot of young men who would dismiss her previous article about sharking as “moral panic”.

I can guarantee that Turner considers herself progressive and on the side of the underdog. And yet, here she is correctly identifying predatory sexist practices when the victims are blonde middle-class girls from the home counties at Russell Group universities but failing to identify the systemic predatory sexist practices that assail the young women who end up in the sex trade to pay their university halls of residence rent. That the latter are more likely to have grown up on grim estates in Bolton or Burnley than in the leafy suburbs or be women of colour from Walsall or Newham can’t be part of the equation, surely?

But the question we need to ask is, what turned those young men who prey on freshers in Bristol and Warwick into sharks? Where did they learn that behaviour? Why is sharking a widespread cultural phenomenon now rather than the rare anomaly it was just a few decades ago? What has changed in our society in that time?

But how is Turner, who is what, 21 or 22? and didn’t know the world before the advent of internet porn, to understand how much it has changed everything? Of course young men who have grown up masturbating to an endless internet menu of women being sexually abused, dehumanised, and tortured are going to think sharking is a lark.

A fundamental part of education is to pass knowledge on to new generations so that they don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Except there are some things that those with power don’t actually want the younger generation to understand. And one of those things is an [analysis](#)<sup>9</sup> of how the patriarchy works **as a system** to keep women subordinated for the benefit of men and capitalist hegemony. Women fought to get that onto the curriculum in the 1970s. But it has long gone – [replaced](#)<sup>10</sup> by reality-obfuscating postmodernism, neoliberalism and queer theory.

Which explains in part why an intelligent and feisty young woman like Turner is vulnerable to accepting the patriarchal trope that any critique of the sex industry is a result of “moral panic”. She’s been systematically deprived of an analysis that would enable her to critique the sex industry as a foundational part of the patriarchal system.

As Vera-Grey says, to bring about change in sharking and similar behaviour, we need to challenge everything that “situates women as being less valuable than men”. And what does that more than the sex industry?

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<sup>9</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/10/09/what-is-feminism-and-why-is-it-important/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://thefeministahood.wordpress.com/2014/11/08/neoliberalism-queer-theory-and-prostitution/>

Universities have failed young women like Turner. They gave her no tools for such analysis and resistance. Nothing to help her see through the bullshit when those “allies” tell her that if you are a smart young woman who is going places in the world, whatever you do, don’t listen to the women who’ve lived long enough to identify the trends that are sweeping the world to the detriment of women and girls. They are moralistic dried-up old prudes, don’t you know? Come on, sex work is valid! Allowing some creepy older guy to fuck you while you pretend he’s fabulous is just like working in McDonald’s. Honest! Anyone who says any different is in the grip of a moral panic, obv.

But Turner is right about one thing and that is that [student funding](#)<sup>11</sup> in the UK is a shitshow. But normalising student engagement in the sex industry as a solution is only going to make things worse. Why would you fix the broken student funding system when the young women are silently enduring being sharked for money? And when the young men can pimp out their girlfriends so easily?

‘Sex work’ good. Sharking doesn’t exist.

OK. So back to what you came for – an account of that “student sex worker” training.

First, I want to make it clear that I am absolutely **not** saying that students who are involved in the sex industry should not be supported or that they should be penalised in any way. And I don’t believe that Diane Abbott MP or Michelle Donelan, the Minister for Higher and Further Education, or any of the other women who spoke out about the Durham training were saying that either.

Our concerns are about what normalising and legitimising the sex industry means in practice – in terms of the suffering of the (mainly) disadvantaged young women who are drawn into its net, and in terms of the continued brutalisation of our young men, and the havoc that their consequent sharking will cause, and in terms of what that means for us as a human community. But there I go, digressing again.

The training in question consists of two sessions. In this article I am only going to cover the first session. I’ll write another one about the second session soon.

The trainers were Gaynor Trueman and Jessica Hyer Griffin, who are both part of the Leicester team. They took it in turns to speak and I mostly won’t identify who said what.

After the introductions, the trainer explained the background to the Leicester student ‘sex work’ [policy and toolkits](#)<sup>12</sup> and how they are focused on “harm reduction”. They are not

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<sup>11</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/11/17/handbook-for-universities-2-why-now/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/05/01/whats-wrong-with-the-leicester-student-sex-worker-policy-and-toolkit/>

going to teach people how to be a sex worker, she said, rather they want to make sure that there's a robust safety resource for everybody involved. She hoped that the project and training would help universities become more "student sex work friendly". This, she said, is a fight for "social justice" and "sex workers' rights". I'll come back to this later on.

She briefly ran through the various types of 'sex work' and the numbers estimated to be involved (between 70,000 and 110,00 in the UK) and she then described the four main legal frameworks governing the global sex industry.

## Four main legal frameworks governing the global Sex Industry

- ▶ **Criminalisation** – whereby the buyer and seller are criminalised
- ▶ **Partial criminalisation** - where the buyer is criminalised, but the seller is decriminalised.
- ▶ **Legalisation/regulated** - sex work is legal if it takes place in accordance with strict government-imposed conditions and regulations
- ▶ **Decriminalisation** – the removal of all sex work specific laws, which means that people who work in the sex industry can access the same labour rights and protections as those in other occupations



She explained that criminalisation means that both buying and selling sex is illegal. No one is seriously lobbying for that in the UK.

Partial criminalisation, which is also known as the Swedish or [Nordic Model](#),<sup>13</sup> criminalises the buyer but decriminalises the seller. That might sound like a good solution, she said, but it actually increases the violence. "It puts the power in the hands of the buyer because he can say, 'I'm a criminal now'."

As Jim said, since when did making something a criminal offence endow the person doing it with more power? You come home to a burglar ransacking your house, and he says, I'm a criminal, you can't touch me! I don't think so. In fact, the opposite is true – he knows you can call the police. Just being in your house ransacking it, is all the police need to arrest and charge him.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/what-is-the-nordic-model/>

Women who have [experienced prostitution](#) <sup>14</sup> under the Swedish system testify to how the law does in fact give them, and not the male client, more power in the situation. He knows that she can call the police because he is committing an offence by just being there. She is not. This motivates him to respect her boundaries and not aggravate her. But you wouldn't know that from this so-called training.

The trainer dismissed the legalised and regulated systems they have in [Germany](#) <sup>15</sup> and [the Netherlands](#) <sup>16</sup> and quickly moved on to decriminalisation. In force in [New Zealand](#) <sup>17</sup> and parts of Australia, this removes all sex industry specific legislation so, she said, “people who work in the industry can access the same labour rights as us”.

Quite how that would work in terms of [health and safety](#), <sup>18</sup> she didn't elaborate – nor how recognising prostitution as work would require accepting that normal health and safety standards do not apply to it and how this precedent might impact other workers down the line.

She went on to say that decriminalisation is “what sex workers say is the holy grail for them.”

She didn't mention that [many women](#) <sup>19</sup> involved in prostitution do **not** see the New Zealand model as the holy grail. Many are absolutely horrified at the idea that pimps should be decriminalised as they effectively are in New Zealand. Nor did she mention [recent research](#) <sup>20</sup> that found that the benefits of the approach in New Zealand have been hugely exaggerated and its downsides have been “ignored, denied, and hidden.”

It's hard to see this part of the “training” as anything other than politically motivated and irrelevant to the claimed aims.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/03/09/the-nordic-model-vs-full-decriminalisation-what-do-sex-trade-survivors-say/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/01/13/prostitution-law-in-germany-regulation-for-taxation/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/12/27/the-women-behind-the-windows-in-amsterdams-red-light-district/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2020/02/26/why-the-nordic-model-a-view-from-new-zealand/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/myths-about-prostitution/myth-regulation-makes-prostitution-safe/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/category/metoo-stories/>

<sup>20</sup> [http://1425f57e-5a05-4bdc-8183-747efed61d9f.filesusr.com/ugd/7f14e6\\_e427c650927141b9b9a2cfed936e1ca1.pdf](http://1425f57e-5a05-4bdc-8183-747efed61d9f.filesusr.com/ugd/7f14e6_e427c650927141b9b9a2cfed936e1ca1.pdf)



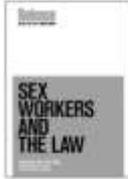
## UK Laws

In England, the law pertaining to sex work is not straightforward: the buying and selling of sex is legal, but many associated activities are criminalised. Under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and the Policing and Crime Act 2009 the following main activities are criminalised:

- Soliciting or loitering
- Kerb Crawling
- Keeping a brothel

It isn't an offence to sex work or work as a maid in a brothel, but it is an offence to keep, manage or act or assist in the management of a brothel. The sentence is a fine or up to seven years in prison.

- Causing or inciting prostitution for gain.
- Controlling prostitution for gain.
- Advertising if it is graphic



<https://www.release.org.uk/publications/sex-workers-and-law-booklet>

<https://youtu.be/8zJtLWou3Y> video from ECP/EN



The trainers then asked participants to do a quiz to test their knowledge about the law in the UK. The results showed a general lack of knowledge about the law – which they then clarified – but again in a biased way.

For example, the trainer mentioned that the “controlling prostitution for gain” offence can be used against “anyone who associates with a sex worker” but she didn’t mention the risk that predatory individuals might coerce young women into the sex industry and keep them there as an easy income stream. It was almost as if the trainers don’t believe this dynamic exists, when in reality it is common. Some [research](#)<sup>21</sup> puts the percentage of women involved in prostitution who are pimped as high as 80% or 90%. In effect, pimping is another form of sharking.

How on earth can universities justify not warning young people of this and not clearly defining it as exploitative behaviour? This does beg the question of whose interests the Leicester team are promoting and whose pockets they are in.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.rapeis.org/activism/prostitution/prostitutionfacts.html>

## Students involved in Sex Work

Numbers participating...



- 1 in 20 or 5% of students had ever been involved
- 1 in 5 or 20% had considered it
- Less than 15% thought their student unions or universities were providing sufficient support\*

\*studentsexworkproject1/NUSstudentsexworkerresearch



The next item repeated the same formula with participants being asked to do a quiz about the numbers of students involved in the sex industry – and again they clarified the reality – that research suggests that about 5% of students are involved in the sex industry with about 20% having considered it in an emergency, and most saying their universities or student unions were not providing enough support.

Who are student sex workers?

### Recent research tells us...

- ▶ A large proportion of student sex workers are from marginalised backgrounds due to lack of access to resources
- ▶ Rising number of medical students thought to be involved due to high fees over an extended study period
- ▶ Number of students entering thought to be rising again due to COVID 19 and lack of access to part-time/casual employment
- ▶ Numbers of international students unknown due to language difficulties and student visa restrictions
- ▶ And the 'ideal' student sex worker?



In response to the question, “Who are the student sex workers”, the trainer said they are from a wide range of backgrounds with different experiences and different motivations for joining the industry. What unites them, she said, is “the stigma and lack of support and access to services”, which mean that the majority suffer from “feelings of isolation and fear of misrepresentation as a result of stereotyping”.

She went on to say that a large proportion of student sex workers come from marginalised backgrounds, such as LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, migrant workers, or international students – groups that are likely to have been hardest hit by poverty and austerity.

Bizarrely she didn't mention the fact that the vast majority of those involved in the sex industry are female, nor the systemic and structural inequality that still holds women back and gives men disproportionate advantages, nor that women have been disproportionately [impacted](#)<sup>22</sup> by austerity.

She went on to say that “student sex workers are sometimes regarded as more intelligent than other groups of sex workers” and she described this as a “misrepresentation” that leads to prostitution websites specifically targeting students. For example, the “sugaring” website, Seeking Arrangement, offers students a free account.

I suppose in the circumstances I shouldn't be surprised that this was stated as a matter of fact with no outrage that a tech giant like Seeking Arrangement should not only profit from the prostitution of vulnerable young women, but also deliberately attempt to suck young women into the industry. But I am outraged.

This training claims to be about how to “keep students safe” and help them make informed choices but it didn't stop to consider that perhaps those vulnerable 17- and 18-year-old freshers should be warned about accepting those free accounts. Seeking Arrangement presents itself as a high-class dating site. How do they expect a naïve young woman to read behind the lines and see that in reality it is a corporate pimp, a giant shark?

Hyer Griffin went straight on to say that given many clients fetishize “student sex workers”, she pretended that she was still a student after she graduated, because she could make more money that way. She put this down to “misrepresentation” and stereotyping. As if it is nothing to do with the sexual fetishization of youth that is promoted by the sexual exploitation industrial complex for profit.

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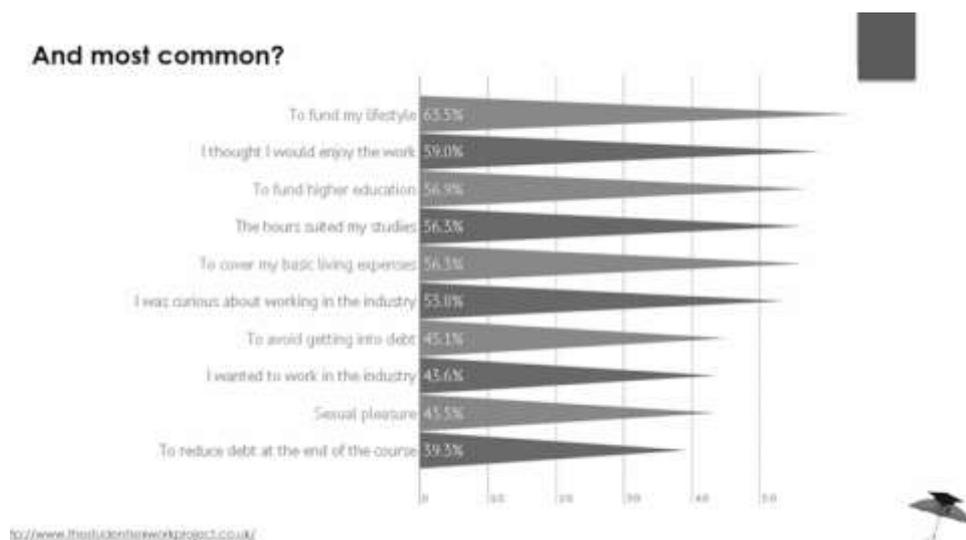
<sup>22</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/04/10/submission-to-the-women-equalities-committees-inquiry-on-the-implementation-of-sdg5/>



This segued into a bizarre section on stereotyping. Participants were told that “any stereotypical associations regarding the sex work industry are harmful for all sex workers and may exacerbate the marginalisation of the sex worker community” and that it’s not a “female gendered occupation”.

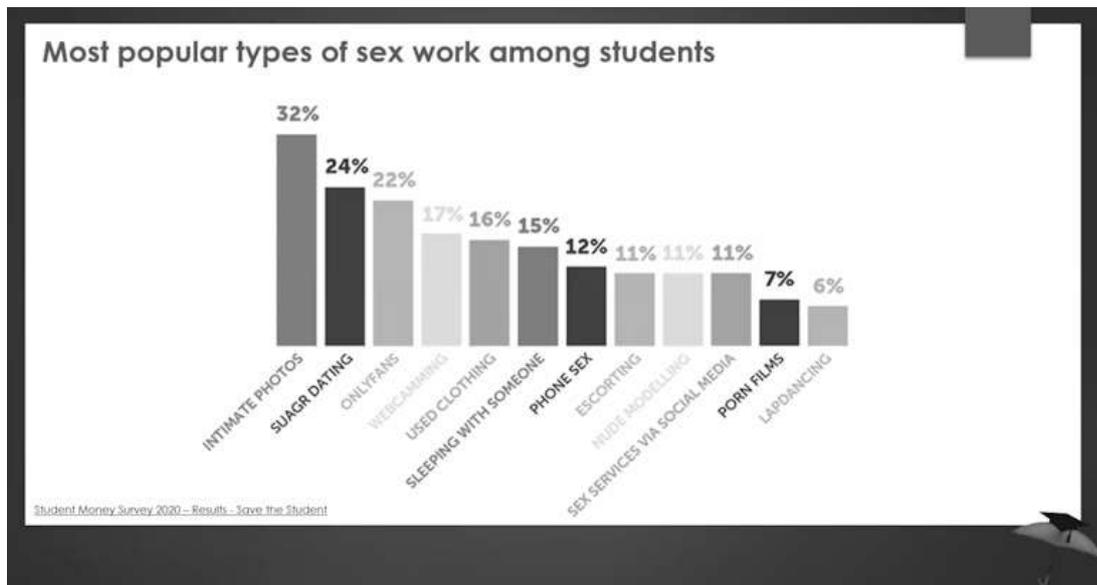
Of course, there are men and trans people involved in the sex industry but the vast majority are female and the consumers are overwhelmingly male. Which sounds like a gendered phenomenon to me. Why the trainers would want to obfuscate this widely recognised fact is anyone’s guess.

In a world where young (mostly) female flesh is fetishized and there’s a sleazy global industry feeding off that, is putting the problems of the sharkees down to “stereotypes” adequate?



Participants then had to do yet another quiz – about what they thought were the main motivations for entering the sex industry. This was followed by the trainer expounding on the

reasons students gave in a previous survey. She noted that most of them involve money and “flexibility”. Again, there was no mention of the sharks and their grooming tactics.



Next up was a slide showing the results of the 2020 Student Money Survey about the types of “sex work” that students said they were involved in. As you can see, there are a wide range of practices. The trainer noted that “indirect sex work” is the most common. There was no discussion about how lumping all of these different activities together under the “sex work” umbrella might obfuscate some of the detail.

**Impacts of COVID-19**

- ▶ Disastrous impact on peoples 'finances and a huge shift online which has reduced the income of online sex workers
- ▶ Increase of people entering the online industry including students leading to an oversaturation of the market
- ▶ Full service sex work made illegal due to social distancing restrictions (which presents danger as it hands the power to the clients)
- ▶ Few economic choices as sex workers not included in government support schemes, 2 thirds struggling to eat
- ▶ The industry has had to pull together and raise funds though crowd funding and donations to support their own

**COVID-19**  
CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019

**IMPACT OF COVID-19**

**COVID-19 AND SEX WORK**

The pandemic has exposed and deepened existing inequalities experienced by sex workers.

SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS ARE A FEMINIST ISSUE

There was then a brief section on the impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown restrictions, including the devastating impact on people’s incomes, the closure of sexual health and mental health services, and physical contact with anyone outside your household becoming illegal.

The latter handed “the power to the clients”, which this time is true, because he could use the threat of exposing her breaking the lockdown laws to pressure her to accept less money or engage in activities she might otherwise refuse.

The trainer mentioned that the negative impact of the restrictions was far worse for working class and marginalised communities, but again there was no mention of the [well-recognised](#)<sup>23</sup> disproportionate impact on women.

For all these reasons, there has been a huge increase in online sex work, she said, and “sex work is becoming more accepted as a viable way to make a living in liberal circles.” This has caused an “oversaturation of the market” and a drop in incomes. For example, there are now about 70 million “content creators” on OnlyFans, compared to about 25 million in 2019.

Talking about the hardship that “sex workers” experienced during the lockdown was used as another opportunity to plug the full decriminalisation model in force in New Zealand, because, she said, it meant that “sex workers” could get proper furlough payments.

I asked one of our contacts in New Zealand about this and she said it’s completely untrue. She said that women involved in prostitution [were excluded](#)<sup>24</sup> from the government furlough schemes. They could apply for unemployment benefit and any other social security payments they qualified for like anyone else. However, because they generally are not employed on employment contracts, they were unlikely to have a paper trail to prove their lost income. In addition, she said, the fear of stigma and judgement stops a lot of women even applying for the benefits they are entitled to. So, not that much different from the UK, then. But what are facts between friends?

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<sup>23</sup> <https://wbg.org.uk/media/open-letters/the-lockdown-is-turning-back-the-clock-on-womens-lives-in-britain/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2020/03/24/wahine-toa-rising-letter-to-new-zealand-ministers/>



**Recent research reported:**

- 65% of student sex workers had faced harassment of any kind while at work
- 58% had experienced sexual harassment while at work
- Just under half (47%) had experienced sexual assault at work
- A third had also experienced physical assault (30%)

**But...**

- 82% of respondents had never contacted the police about a crime involving their work
- Less than 50% of students said they would feel comfortable going to the police if they had experienced property theft, violence or sexual violence by clients (NUS)

**Due to:**

- Privacy/anonymity: fear of becoming known to police, leading to public identification/university knowing.
- Belief is not taken seriously: 'occupational hazard' /judged
- Additional issues faced by migrant, male & transgender sex workers



Next up was a run down of the abuse, violence and crimes that those involved in the sex industry habitually face, including blackmail, being outed, physical and sexual assault, verbal harassment, non-payment and underpayment, and persistent unwanted contact via phone, email, text, social media (i.e. stalking).

The trainer said that in “full-service sex work”, non-payment or underpayment is rape, because the consent given is conditional on the agreed terms and payment – so a breach of that agreement is a breach of the conditional consent and ergo it is rape. There was no discussion of how the concept of conditional consent undermines the normal understanding of rape as unwanted sex.

Hacking, doxing and outing sex workers has, she said, “become a fetish” and there are now websites dedicated to revealing the identities of sex workers – particularly online sex workers – and to sharing illegally recorded videos of private webcamming sessions, etc.

Very few of these crimes are reported, because of a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system or doubts that they will be taken seriously, fears it will lead to the involvement of social services and/or immigration enforcement, or that it will lead to being publicly identified as a “sex worker” and the university being informed.

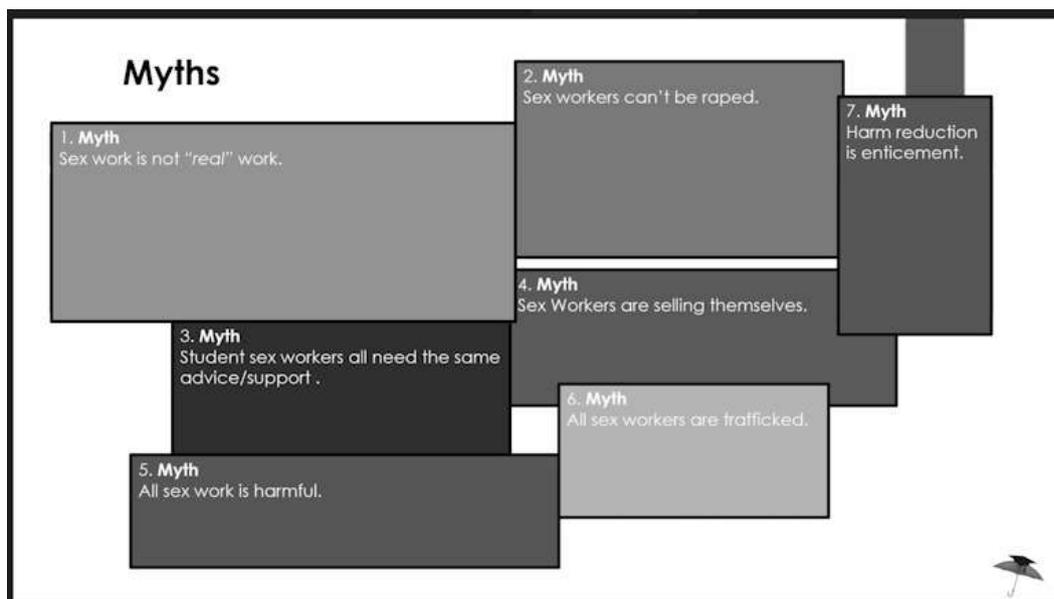
This lack of confidence in the criminal justice system is hardly surprising given the current climate where rape has effectively been decriminalised. However, there was no discussion of how this might be connected to the ubiquity of porn and the sex industry and how these lead men, including those in the police, on juries, and in the judiciary, to see women as fair game.

The trainer then rattled off some terrifying statistics: 58% of student sex workers who had responded to a survey reported that they had experienced sexual harassment while at “work”, 47% had experienced sexual assault at “work”, and around a third had also experienced physical assault.

Again, there was no discussion of the fact that as the “sex work” term includes many practices that do not include physical contact (such as webcamming and selling soiled underwear), a much higher proportion of those who are involved in “full service” prostitution are likely to have experienced sexual and physical assault than this data suggests.

She said a [study](#)<sup>25</sup> of female sex workers in London found their mortality to be 12 times higher than women in the general population, and murder was identified as one of the leading causes of their death. The same study recorded that there were 180 sex workers murdered in the UK between 1990 and 2016 – although the actual numbers are thought to be higher.

Without a moment’s reflection about what the stats she’d just rattled off might mean and what it says about who the perpetrators are, she moved straight onto a section on debunking so-called myths.



First up was why “sex work” really is “real work”. The dictionary says work is performing duties in return for wages, she said, so performing “erotic labour” in exchange for money is definitely work too.

But... But... What about those terrifying mortality and murder rates? How is being groped and penetrated labour?

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/criminology/people/teela-sanders/sex-work-and-homicide>

But there was no time to stop and think, because she was on to the next myth: “Sex workers can’t be raped.” In sex work, consent is conditional, she said. So as long as the terms and conditions are met, it’s therefore not rape. But if the terms are not met, then it is rape – just as stealing, the non-consensual removal of a condom, is coming to be thought of as rape.

Myth 3 hardly deserves repeating. Of course, student “sex workers” don’t all need identical advice and support.

Her attempt to demolish Myth 4 “Sex workers are selling themselves” was in a similar breathless vein. You can’t buy a person or their body she said. And that is that. But... But... Don’t dally. We haven’t got all day.

But, she said, language is important, because people who are in “sex work” sometimes judge whether they can trust you by the language you use. If you use the word “prostitute” or suggest they are selling themselves, they won’t want to come to you for support, she said.

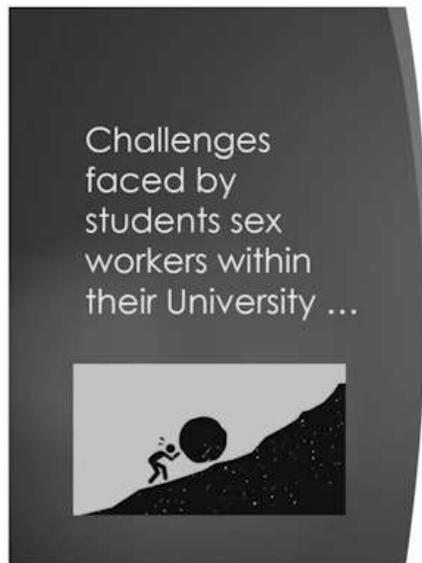
Her explanation for why “All sex work is harmful” is a myth was that it minimizes the harms of rape and violence. But before you could say, but... she was on to explaining why “All sex workers are trafficked” is also a myth: “Although this is an important issue, it’s actually been shown that it is only a very small minority who are trafficked.” Of course, she never mentioned that how many victims you find depends on how you define them and the UK [doesn’t follow international law](#)<sup>26</sup> in this and systematically undercounts the numbers involved.

And so it went on. Harm reduction is not enticement because harm reduction is ensuring someone is fully informed of safety tactics. What safety tactics might make a difference to that 12 times higher than normal mortality rate, you want to ask? And if, as I suspect, there’s nothing that can make a difference to it, might the problem with “harm reduction” be more about giving women a false sense of security and keeping them trapped in an intolerable situation, rather than something as crude as “enticement”?

But it was too late, because the myths had been demolished and that, she said, brought her on to “the challenges that sex workers face”.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/07/29/who-will-remember-the-sex-trafficking-victims/>



- ▶ Isolation
- ▶ Discrimination
- ▶ Judgement/stigma
- ▶ Secrecy (stated as the most negative aspect of being involved in sex work)
- ▶ Fear of abuse/violence
- ▶ Fear of eviction
- ▶ Suspension from studies
- ▶ Permanently expelled



Hyer Griffin was leading the session at this point and she spoke from her personal experience in the sex industry. She said that when she was an undergraduate, the stigma and lack of support made her feel that she had to hide what she was doing and it led to feelings of shame and isolation. She felt she was “beyond help” and she said that many of the “sex workers” who come to her organisation express something similar.

She said that most students say that the most negative aspect of “sex work” is the stigma and the need to keep their involvement secret and she went on to give examples of various bad experiences that had followed students being outed in one way or another. For example, landlords not returning deposits and refusing to give references, and even more disturbing, university tutors blackmailing students.

## Impact on Mental Health



- Support can be sought due to numerous factors outside of sex work
- Impact of keeping involvement secret
- Negative impact of stigma amongst peer groups and University staff
- Importance of 'informed', non-judgemental support in Universities

<https://uglymugs.org/um/mental-health-resources-page/>  
<https://uglymugs.org/um/uploads/NUM-DIRECTORY-OF-SW-FRIENDLY-THERAPISTS-270321.pdf>

After saying that students involved in the sex industry all have different experiences and needs, Hyer Griffin emphasised that mental health disabilities might predate their involvement in the sex industry and that they might often seek support from university staff for issues unrelated to their “sex work”.

She then went on to talk again about her own experiences. She has bipolar disorder, agoraphobia and PTSD. This meant that she couldn't leave her home or hold down a “square job”, but found that “full-service sex work” suited her needs as a “disabled provider.”

She explained that working 12-hour shifts in a bar for the minimum wage with at most only a 5-minute cigarette break was “not viable”. She said this is why making more in one hour of sex work than in a full shift in a low paid job is an attractive option for many students.

She went on to say, “I would argue that I felt more oppressed as a waitress than I did in sex work despite the risk of sexual assault and the dangerous clients I experienced. When I had control of the situation and I worked in the industry out of choice, I did enjoy my job.”

She said it was the stigma, personal shame, the need for secrecy and the lack of support options that made the work difficult. She said, the people she supports say this too.

She then talked about “sex workers” being rejected by services because they are seen as “too high risk” and how wrong this is. However, she said, it's completely acceptable for a member of university staff to admit that disclosures around sex work are not their speciality and that they need to refer on – but, she said, it's important to refer to “student- and peer-led organisations”.

She did admit that there are risks of mental health problems that directly stem from involvement in the sex industry, but she minimised this by saying that students are exposed to many circumstances that impact their health anyway.

She said the solution is to reduce the stigma around involvement in the sex work industry and for universities to have an “open dialogue”, which would reduce the shame, and allow every student to know that they have the right to be supported regardless what they choose to do.

As someone who has spent many years listening to women who have been in the sex trade talk about their experiences, I find this narrative disturbing. There is no proper recognition of the [well-documented](#) <sup>27</sup> and very serious dangers to the physical and mental health of

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<sup>27</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/11/17/handbook-for-universities-4-what-are-we-talking-about-when-we-talk-of-the-sex-industry/>

involvement in the sex industry. Instead it presents such involvement as a **solution** to mental health problems.

Training university students and staff in this way is irresponsible. It also contradicts Hyer Griffin's [own testimony](#) <sup>28</sup> before she became involved with the team at Leicester University, in which she clearly describes how her involvement in prostitution had "a severe effect on her mental health" and how she "was left traumatised by some of her experiences with men who paid her, and has had therapy to recover". She said that her mental health "severely deteriorated around this time and it was heavily influenced" by her involvement in the sex industry and that in her experience, the vast majority of clients "don't treat you like you're human."

And yet here she is, promoting a very different picture to vulnerable young people and their mentors. Make of that what you will.

Which can result in...

*"My flatmate saw my box of lingerie and my second phone and humiliated me by reading out the texts from customers at dinner later that night in front of my other housemates. I tried to kill myself that night and was referred to the university counselling service, but I felt too ashamed to tell them why I really tried to kill myself!"\**

\*Testimony from a student sex worker

*"I've been studying psychotherapy for 3 years now whilst sex working. I would like to specialise in rape and abuse one day and I love to help people. I would never tell my University however because they might see me as a risk to patients or that I'm somehow too immoral to be a therapist. That's not true at all and in fact, being a sex worker allows me to be a be a good therapist and allows me to afford my studies!"\**

\*Testimony from a student sex worker

Trueman then ran through a couple of student stories that both have a focus on shame. First:

*"My flatmate saw my box of lingerie and my second phone and humiliated me by reading out the texts from customers at dinner later that night in front of my other housemates. I tried to kill myself that night and was referred to the university counselling service, but I felt too ashamed to tell them why I really tried to kill myself."*

This is clearly distressing and the student's friend behaved appallingly. In the second story, the shame is internalised:

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/i-scared-hed-kill-me-16467727>

*“I’ve been studying psychotherapy for three years now whilst sex working. I would like to specialise in rape and abuse one day and I love to help people. I would never tell my university however because they might see me as a risk to patients or that I’m somehow too immoral to be a therapist. that’s not true at all and in fact, being a sex worker allows me to be a good therapist and allows me to afford my studies.”*

Nordic Model Now! is very clear that no one should be penalised for their own prostitution. However, we do not believe that the stigma and shame will disappear by opening up the sex industry ever further. The evidence is that in countries, like [Germany](#)<sup>29</sup> and [New Zealand](#),<sup>30</sup> that have gone down that route, the shame and stigma has lessened for the clients, but not for the women engaged in the industry.

We believe the shame is intrinsic to the industry itself. It is connected to the way women involved in the industry are, as Hyer Griffin herself said, treated as if they are not human. No one should have to experience that. And no one should pretend that it’s a normal job or that it has any purpose beyond feeding men’s entitlement and sense of superiority. Or to put it more bluntly, feeding the sharks.

What do students who sex work want from their Universities?

- ▶ Acknowledgement that student sex workers exist
- ▶ Acceptance of their rights to both study and sex work
- ▶ Assurance of non-judgmental, informed support following disclosure
- ▶ Support from their Universities if they have been treated unfairly because of their involvement
- ▶ Understanding of their work and the challenges it can create such as stigma
- ▶ Reassurance that their study place is not in jeopardy because of their sex work
- ▶ Non-judgemental services
- ▶ Informed support if someone wants to leave the sex industry
- ▶ Access to safety information
- ▶ Information regarding avenues of support

They then ran through a list of things that they claimed “student sex workers” want from their universities. These are all predicated on acceptance of the status quo where significant numbers of students are involved in the sex industry, and that the main harms come from

<sup>29</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/03/09/the-nordic-model-vs-full-decriminalisation-what-do-sex-trade-survivors-say/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/10/12/why-stigma-against-women-involved-in-prostitution-persists-in-new-zealand/>

other people’s attitudes to it (“stigma”) rather than that there is anything inherently damaging about the sex industry itself.

Of course, students need high-quality non-judgemental support, but they also need alternatives, and to understand the very real dangers and risks involved so they can make real informed choices.

**Key Support**



**National Ugly Mugs (NUM)**  
Third party reporting site offering advocacy, safety, support and training to sex workers and practitioners. Mission to ‘end violence against sex workers’.  
[www.uglymugs.org/um](http://www.uglymugs.org/um)  
Tips & Tih. #8: Student Sex Work - YouTube



**Revenge Porn Helpline**  
A UK service supporting adults (aged 18+) who are experiencing intimate image abuse, also known as, revenge porn.  
[www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk](http://www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk)  
[https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/assets/files/student-and-sex-work-v3.pdf?\\_id=1599143122](https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/assets/files/student-and-sex-work-v3.pdf?_id=1599143122) (student resources)



**Support for Student Sex Workers**  
Project offering support and advice to students who sex work and other sex workers.  
[www.supportforstudentsexworkers.org/support.html](http://www.supportforstudentsexworkers.org/support.html)  
**Helpline:** 07861381289



**North East Sex Work Forum**  
Develop and deliver services for individuals involved in all aspects of the sex industry.  
[www.neswf.co.uk](http://www.neswf.co.uk)

For a list of peer support and other frontline agencies see the student sex work toolkits for both staff and students: [Toolkits and student resources | School of Criminology | University of Leicester](#)

Having earlier said that student “sex workers” should only be referred to student- or peer-led services, they then proceeded to recommend three organisations that are not student or peer-led, along with ‘Support for Student Sex Workers,’ which is Hyer Griffin’s organisation.

## How to be a Sex Worker friendly university

- ▶ Include sex workers as a group of people who are marginalised in any EDI campaigns/ policies
- ▶ Train staff in awareness of sex work related issues and particularly the law (please share this training offer with relevant colleagues)
- ▶ Ensure links to toolkits for both students who sex work and staff who can offer support are shared and accessible [Student Sex Work | School of Criminology | University of Leicester](#)
- ▶ Support Sex worker specific campaigns such as 17<sup>th</sup> Dec – International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers #IDEVASW
- ▶ Discuss possibility embedding sex worker inclusive policy for students within University’s governance structures (breaks down barriers / ensures openness about what would happen, more accountability)
- ▶ Make links with related organisations – NUM/ Revenge Porn Helpline, Support for Student Sex Workers, North East Sex Work Forum etc.

The final slide before the questions and feedback questionnaire, was a list setting out how to be a “sex worker friendly university”. Whatever you do, don’t question men’s rights to buy sexual access to students or how this might affect the prevalence of sharking on campus. And

never ever suggest to students that they might like to consider other options or that universities should be working to ensure that no student is left with no option but involvement in the sex trade.

## Conclusion

This so-called training obfuscates the real dangers of the sexual exploitation industry and that pimps and punters are the main source of the danger. Well-meaning university staff attend the training in good faith, and rather than gaining a realistic picture of the harms of the sex trade – to both the individuals who are drawn into it, the blokes who consume it, and to the wider community – and an understanding of how universities and their staff can ethically respond, they get befuddlement and propaganda.

Near the very end of the session, Trueman said, “It’s not about whether you agree with sex work. It’s about the fact that people should be safe in their job.” But the trainers never did say how they can make students involved in the sex industry “safe”. I suspect that’s because they know as well as I do that nothing can make them safe.

At the start of the training, they claimed it was about a fight for “social justice” and “sex workers’ rights”. I dispute this. It reminds me of nothing so much as those last century academics in the pockets of the tobacco barons claiming that they were fighting for smokers’ safety and human rights.

## A different approach

- [The Nordic Model Now! Handbook for Universities](#) <sup>31</sup>

## Petition against the Leicester approach

- [Revoke Leicester University’s ‘Student Sex Work Toolkit’](#) <sup>32</sup>

## Further reading

- [What’s wrong with the Leicester Student Sex Worker Policy and Toolkit?](#) <sup>33</sup>
- [Does the Leicester student ‘sex work’ toolkit comply with equality legislation?](#) <sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/the-nordic-model-now-handbook-for-universities/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/revoke-leicester-university-s-student-sex-work-toolkit>

<sup>33</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/05/01/whats-wrong-with-the-leicester-student-sex-worker-policy-and-toolkit/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/06/23/does-the-leicester-student-sex-work-toolkit-comply-with-equality-legislation/>