

Institution: Swansea University		
Unit of Assessment: UoA18		
Title of case study: Student Sex Workers: Reducing Stigma and Improving Well-being		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012 to 2015		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Professor Tracey Sagar Mrs. Deborah Jones	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Criminology Associate Professor in Criminology	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2002 – present 2009 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 to 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Sagar and Jones led ‘The Student Sex Work Project’ (TSSWP), the first large scale study of student participation in the sex industry. The project provided baseline evidence of the prevalence of sex work among students at all levels of higher education in the UK, and the problems they experienced through the stigma surrounding this work.</p> <p>Adopting a collaborative and participatory approach, the research brought about the following changes that reduced perceived notions of stigma and ultimately improved well-being:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The establishment of the first e-health service for student sex workers and improved service provider responses for student sex workers • Enhanced student sex workers’ well-being through awareness-raising and policy change within the student body • The empowerment of student sex workers through the inclusion of their voices in public dissemination and debate, film, and the training of professionals 		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Work completed between 2012 and 2015, with publications appearing from 2015 to 2016. Led by Professor Tracey Sagar (Principal Investigator) and Associate Professor Debbie Jones (Lead Researcher and Project Manager) with two Swansea University-based research assistants, Dr Jacky Tyrie 2012-2014 and Dr Katrien Symons 2014-2015. Project partners included Terrence Higgins Trust Cymru (THT) (third sector sexual health service provider) and Cardiff and Vale NHS (sexual health service provider). Consultants contributed at the request of the project leads: the National Union of Students (NUS) Cymru (advisers and gatekeepers), Sam Geuens (clinical sexologist), Professor Roger Tarling (quantitative expert) and Dr. Ron Roberts (publications consultant). Professor Chris Morris, Newport Film School, produced films for the project (executive producers: Sagar and Jones).</p> <p>TSSWP was a participatory action research project involving student sex workers in the research process from its design to completion. Throughout the project lifespan, 7 student sex workers were employed as researchers, with support from approximately 75 student volunteers from Higher Education Institutions across Wales. The student sex worker researchers later played a key role in the dissemination of the research and promoting the changes described below. The underpinning methodology of the project brought together research, service delivery and public engagement with the intention of generating sustainable impact that began with the genesis of the project and continued in an embedded format after the initial project ended [R1].</p>		

The underpinning research comprised three strands:

a. Prevalence, motivation and needs of student sex workers

E-health services and data collection. Funded as the first e-health service for sex workers in Wales, TSSWP was the first study of student sex work to combine data collection and service provision, and to be led by university academics acting as both scientific researchers and support service providers. Data was collected via online instant messenger 'chat conversations' with student sex workers (project members) who were also offered support and advice. The data provided detailed and previously under-explored accounts of the lives of student sex workers and highlighted issues of social isolation, stigma, reluctance to access services and lack of safety [R1]. These findings were used immediately to enhance the service elements of the project thus bringing about evidence-led impact and both [R1] and [R2] underpinned improvements to sexual health service provision and professional practice beyond the project.

Online Survey. TSSWP was the first to study student sex work on a large scale through an online survey. 6,773 survey responses revealed the first statistically significant account of prevalence rates of participation in the sex industry of students in UK Higher Education (HE). The key findings from this element of the project were a) 22% of students responding to the survey had considered sex work and 5% had been involved in some capacity and b) male students were more likely to engage in sex work than female students. Reasons for involvement were varied. 64% wanted to fund a lifestyle, 56% to cover basic living expenses and 45% to avoid getting into debt. 59% thought they would enjoy the work and 57% were looking to fund their degree [R1, R2]. The biggest negative impact on the lives of student sex workers was having to keep sex work a secret (50%) due to fears of stigma and judgement. The study found that students engaged in sex work were falling through gaps in service delivery with 21% accessing student counselling services but not disclosing their occupations [R1, R2]. The results indicated the need to break down stigma within the student body with student sex workers fearing being judged by peers and HE staff for what they do rather than who they are [R1].

b. Higher Education responses to student sex workers

Sagar and Jones conducted an HE case study with 138 respondents: academics, professional services (including well-being, finance, and disability support) and representatives from NUS Cymru. The key research findings were that respondents a) felt unable to offer student sex workers support and guidance, b) felt they had a poor understanding of the legal aspects of sex work and c) did not know how to tailor support for these students [R3]. 65% of respondents indicated that online guidance was needed with 63% indicating the need for university policy or guidance around the topic. 55% indicated that they would benefit from face to face training [R3]. As a result of the findings, the project developed a face-to-face and online training package [R4] to enhance service provision after completion of the study.

c. Stigma and unheard voices

A further research theme was to understand the impact negative stigma has on the lives of student sex workers. Findings from survey responses and TSSWP online resource, netreach (an online outreach service developed by the project), indicated that perceived or experienced stigma led to psychological and physical harm to students. Examples included having to keep sex work secret and putting themselves in vulnerable positions through lone working (as a consequence of working in secret) [R1]. They also expressed a need to be heard in both public and policy discourse [R1]. Therefore, embedded into the research process was the creation of a documentary drama, 'Fog of Sex' [R5], and a series of short films [R6] which drew directly on interviews with student sex workers.

3. References to the research

The quality of the research is evidenced as follows: references [R1] and [R5] were funded by the peer reviewed Big Lottery Innovation Fund; [R2] and [R3] were published by peer reviewed international journals; [R4] was peer reviewed by academics, sex workers and practitioners; [R5] was a two-time award winner (Bafta Cymru and The Celtic Media Festival).

[R1] Sagar, T., Jones, D., Symons, K., Bowring, J. (2015). *The Student Sex Work Project*:

Research Summary. bit.ly/SSWPResearchSummary

[R2] Sagar, T., Jones, D., Symons, K., Tyrie, J., Roberts, R. (2016). Student Involvement in the UK Sex Industry: Motivations and Experiences. *British Journal of Sociology* 67(4), 697-718. doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12216

[R3] Sagar, T., Jones, D., Symons, K., Bowring, J., Roberts, R. (2015). Student Participation in the Sex Industry: Higher Education Responses and Staff Experiences and Perceptions. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 37(4), 400-412. doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2015.1056604

[R4] The Student Sex Work online training package (2019) (access available on request)

[R5] Sagar, T., Jones, D., (Executive Producers), & Morris, C., (Director). (2015). *Fog of Sex: Stories from the frontline of student sex work* [Docudrama Film] United Kingdom: bit.ly/FogOfSex

[R6] BBC3 5-episode series *Student Sex Workers – Turning Fetishes into Finance* (2015) bit.ly/BBC3StudentSexWorkers

4. Details of the impact

4.1 The establishment of the first e-health service for student sex workers and improved service provider responses for student sex workers

Improving student sex worker's well-being and safety through new e-health services. TSSWP provided a non-judgemental, anonymous and inclusive e-health service for students working in the sex industry. Responding to the needs of project members, services grew throughout the project's lifetime to provide (a) sexual health information and a search engine to locate local services, (b) online peer-led support through a moderated project members' chat room, (c) online one-to-one confidential counselling with a sexologist and (d) safety advice provided by an experienced outreach worker through netreach. According to one student sex worker project member, "I used the website a lot at first when I was sorting my safety out. The Netreach was really great. I was able to get help and I also used the forum and the sexual health pages for basic info" [C1]. Further, after receiving safety advice and support from the project, the member stated, "I am safe now. I am no longer being taken advantage of by a client I couldn't control. I think maybe he would have eventually killed me if I hadn't got help from the project..." [C1]. The online facilities offered the space for the development of trustful relationships, befriending and peer support impacting directly on project members: "I don't feel ashamed and I can be honest with the project and that keeps me safe and it makes me happier as I feel like my voice is being heard and taken seriously" [C1].

Improving the responsiveness of established service providers to student sex workers. Solutions to the obstacles of sex workers accessing services and the need for non-judgemental service provision (identified by Sagar and Jones in [R1] and [R2]) were addressed through the project's sex worker researchers working directly alongside the project sexual health partners, namely the NHS and THT. For the NHS, the first sexual health clinic for student sex workers was set up in the Cardiff and Vale Health Board area. This led to the development of the first outreach service to off-street establishments in Cardiff, reaching student sex workers who worked indoors and, in doing so, improving the quality and diversity of sexual health services [C1]. Additionally, THT were able for the first time to "consider the needs of sex workers more fully and to be more open to asking questions about sex work when conducting assessments [with service users]", with the aim of enhancing equality in service provision and stronger organisational support and advice for sex workers [C2].

Sagar and Jones' research [R1, R2, R3] enabled Public Health Wales to provide evidence regarding "students' views on and understanding of sexual health related needs and risks" [C3] for the 2017/2018 Sexual Health Review for Wales. This review is particularly concerned with reducing inequalities in Wales through improving sexual health service provision and access to that provision.

4.2 The enhancement of student sex workers' well-being through awareness-raising and policy change within the student body

Breaking down stigma. Engaging with the wider student body on the negative impacts of stigma on student sex workers was ongoing throughout the lifetime of the project. Project workers attended 30 Fresher's Fayres in Wales over three years. Part of this interaction included the sharing of the project's key findings on the psychological impact and social isolation which student sex workers attribute to stigmatisation. 1687 students then completed a short questionnaire: 86% indicated they were more aware of the stigma sex workers can face and 90% indicated that they would be more likely to challenge stigma against sex workers at their respective universities [C2]. This knowledge exchange encouraged the social inclusion of isolated sex workers: *"Stigma takes a long time to break down but [the project] certainly had an impact. There is more awareness now and conversations take place. I definitely feel there is more acceptance, at least at [my university]"* [C1].

NUS: policy development. The NUS were at the forefront of TSSWP research activities. Representatives from across the UK (including NUS Scotland, NUS England, NUS Wales) took part in annual policy group meetings hosted by the project [C2]. This was the first time that the NUS had engaged in discussions on issues pertaining to student sex work and this led directly to changes in NUS policy. The Women's Officer at NUS Cymru at the time said that the project: *"has been invaluable for NUS' understanding of student sex work in UK higher education institutions. We now have evidence indicating the proportion of students who engage in sex work, the types of sex work students are more likely to do and crucially, how best they can be supported to succeed in HE. The report's recommendations have been taken up in our policy and campaigning work, including how we should tackle the prejudices and stigma that still exist in HE"* [C4].

In 2016, the issue of student sex work became a key aspect of NUS advocacy work and, with the support of Jones and Sagar, the NUS produced its own public scholarship report, which drew directly on the findings and recommendations of the TSSWP. The report called for HE and NUS staff to receive training to support student sex workers: *"As The Student Sex Worker Project recommends - a basic level of training should be given to all staff in further and higher education institutions and students unions on sex work so they do not discriminate and stigmatise student sex workers who disclose. Training should cover...diversity of occupations within the sex industry...[S]tereotyping and stigma...[T]he needs of student sex workers..."* [C5 p.26].

Sagar and Jones' research has assisted local NUS organisations to establish policies and processes. For example, the Vice President of Kent University's Student Union stated in 2019: *"Policy development was a key recommendation of TSSWP's research report and I (and other key staff) recognised the need to establish a policy around processes in place if a student discloses working in the sex industry for staff and ensuring students do not face discipline but rather supported".* Further, *"[T]he impact of TSSWP's findings and wider public engagement tools has undoubtedly re-shaped the approach to student sex work at Kent. Also, importantly, with the help of Tracey and Debbie we have been able to fulfil important NUS objectives – to reduce the stigma associated with sex work and to provide non-judgemental services"* [C6].

4.3 The empowerment of student sex workers through the inclusion of their voices in public dissemination and debate, film, and the training of professionals

Raising awareness about well-being needs through public engagement and dissemination. The project's public engagement endeavours were specifically designed to bring the hidden voices of student sex workers into public debates and the service development/delivery arena. In this way, the project contributed to a wider public and professional understanding of basic standards of student sex workers' well-being, *from the perspectives of student sex workers themselves.* The project's strategy of reaching out to the public through print and online media to encourage thinking about and understanding of students' involvement in the sex industry resulted in widespread interest in the topic, as evidenced by 71 instances of international coverage spread over 5 continents, with the research reported in 23 countries situated in Europe; South, East and North Asia; North America/Central North America; Australasia; South, East and West Africa) [C7].

The testimonies of student sex workers were narrated in a documentary, the 2015 BAFTA Cymru winning film 'Fog of Sex' [R5], which also won The Celtic Media Festival's *Best Film for Young People* in 2016. The films de-mystify who is a sex worker and the consequences of stereotyping and stigma from the perspectives of student sex workers themselves. Public

screenings of the film with question-and-answer sessions, led by Sagar and Jones, were held in Welsh Universities, public entertainment venues and science festivals/events, namely the Hay festival, Cheltenham Science Festival and the British Science Festival. According to leading sex work experts, Sanders and Campbell, *“This has gone a significant way to reaching out to the general public and audiences beyond the Higher Education setting to flag up the complexities of sex work, the motivations of young people entering the sex industry whilst studying and dispels some of the stereotypes commonly associated with sex work. The film will have continued impact leaving in place a resource for engagement with a wide range of audiences...”*

[C1]. Since then, the film has been broadcast on the Community Channel in 2016 with over 50,000 viewings and on BBC3’s *Gender Season* since 2015 with over 1,000,000 viewings. The BBC produced ‘Student Sex Workers – Turning Fetishes into Finance’, a five-episode series of short films with testimonies **[R6]** taken directly from the research, which was screened on BBC3 Online and You Tube with more than **17,800,266 viewings**.

Empowering student sex workers through self-representation in film. Through the films, student sex worker voices entered the public arena to directly challenge the stigma that keeps them socially excluded and vulnerable. The creative research and dissemination process had a strong personal impact on those whose stories the films are based on. One sex worker wrote, *“[Taking part in the film] has been a really important and life-changing part of my life. I still think about it a lot. It empowered me to start making some changes. I felt like my story wasn’t dramatized or made more interesting or more to fit in with what the project wanted to portray. That made me feel my story was important as it was. [...] The film gave me a voice when I never had one before. This has been massively empowering for me”* **[C8]**.

Empowering student sex workers through co-produced training. The research results **[R1, R2, R3]** were used to develop the first online training tool to promote professional understanding about student sex work among HE staff/support services/practitioners who have contact with students. The training was co-produced with student sex worker project members and project partners to raise awareness about stigma and its negative impact on students engaged in the sex industry. Importantly, it focuses on issues that student sex workers want those who work in HE/support services to have a better understanding of. As one student sex worker explained, *“Looking at the future, I know that my involvement in the project has already had a large impact. For example, the video diaries I made while taking part in the production of the film are being used as part of the training with charities, public health organisations, or people from the police”* **[C8]**. The training launched in June 2019 and, to date, it has been taken up by approximately 100 professionals across the UK (for example, in HEIs, NUS, NHS and the police). It has also been incorporated into a national toolkit under development at Leicester University. According to the NUS Vice President at Kent University, *“The online training developed by Debbie and Tracey has also been a fantastic tool which has increased our knowledge and understanding on a range of important issues (in particular tackling stereotypes and how to address a disclosure) and it has helped us to understand what is important to student sex workers themselves”* **[C6]**.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[C1] Sanders, T. and Campbell, R. (2015) Final Evaluation Report Student Sex Work Wales.

[C2] Terrence Higgins Trust (THT) Regional Manager for West and Wales. Testimonial.

[C3] Public Health Wales, Sexual Health Programme Lead. Testimonial.

[C4] NUS, Women’s Officer. Testimonial.

[C5] NUS (2016) *Student Sex Worker Research*.

[C6] NUS Vice President, Kent University. Testimonial.

[C7] TSSWP Media Coverage.

[C8] Student Sex Worker Project Member. Testimonial.