Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csed20

Students and sex work in the UK: providers and purchasers

Ron Roberts [a] , Amy Jones [a] & Teela Sanders [b]

[a] Department of Psychology, Kingston University, London, UK

[b] School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Version of record first published: 23 Nov 2012.

To cite this article: Ron Roberts , Amy Jones & Teela Sanders (2013): Students and sex work in the UK: providers and purchasers, Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning, 13:3, 349-363

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2012.744304

Sex Education, 2013
Vol. 13, No. 3, 349–363, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2012.744304

Students and sex work in the UK: providers and purchasers

Ron Roberts[a]*, Amy Jones[a] and Teela Sanders[b]

[a]*Department of Psychology, Kingston University, London, UK;* [b]*School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK*

(*Received 1 August 2012; final version received 24 October 2012*)

Available evidence suggests that changes in the funding of UK higher education in recent years have been accompanied by an increased student presence in the sex industry, ostensibly for financial reasons and to make ends meet. The current study comprises a sample of students ($N = 200$) drawn from several universities in the UK. Data were gathered on financial and employment circumstances, a range of measures of psychological well-being, attitudes to sex work, whether respondents were currently engaged in different types of sex work and whether they had participated in utilising a range of sexual services or forms of adult entertainment. Results indicated that around 6% (2.7%–9.3%) of the sample was currently working in the sex industry – in erotic dancing, stripping or escorting, with significant numbers of both male and female students also involved in purchasing and using sexual services. Little evidence was found to link these activities to prior experiences of psychological adversity. The implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: higher education; students; sex work; sexual consumption; UK

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, with attendant changes to the funding arrangements for UK higher education students, reports have appeared with some regularity charting the increasing student presence in the provision of sexual services (e.g. Barrett 1997; Chapman 2001; Whitaker 2001; Brinkworth 2007; Dolman 2008). Whilst there may always have been some incidental student presence in the industry prior to the restructuring of higher education, there can be little doubt that the growing impoverishment of the student population has gone hand in hand with a growth in the number of student sex workers, a correlation that serves as a reminder that sex work, amongst other things, may be seen as 'an act of resistance to the experience of relative poverty' (McLeod 1982, 26).

With the globalisation of higher education markets, events in the UK have been mirrored further afield in Europe (Duvall Smith 2006), Australia (Sedgman 2004; Lantz 2005) and the USA (Weitzer 2000). During this time, as student indebtedness has mushroomed,[1] the variety of ways in which students engage in the sex economy has developed considerably. This includes participation in wet-t-shirt competitions (BBC 2004), phone sex (Robertson 2012), strip-based entertainment (Sanders and Hardy 2012), prostitution (Chapman 2001) as well as membership of 'sugar daddy' websites (Channel 4 News 2012) where 'cash strapped young women', one-third of whom are students and these from some of the UK's elite universities,[2] seek mutually beneficial relationships with

*Corresponding author. Email: r.a.roberts@kingston.ac.uk

rich 'sponsors'. These developments cannot be divorced from the normalisation of sexual consumption, which has moved into the high street (Attwood 2006) and taken the middle classes with it.

Academic scrutiny of the sexualisation of higher education however has fallen way behind the media attention which has closely followed it. This lack of research activity owes something to the alarmist panics about sex trafficking which have been promoted by policy makers as well as the very real practical difficulties of conducting research in institutions which now see themselves as corporations and thereby in the manner of corporations seek to control the image they present to the wider public, fearing that publicity about student sex-workers will not only harm their public image but affect their income from prospective 'customers' (Roberts 2010). This issue will be explored later in the paper.

The research data which have been gathered have tracked the growing knowledge that students have about their presence in sex markets – from 3.4% in 1999 (Roberts et al. 2000) to 10.5% in 2006 (Roberts, Bergström, and La Rooy 2007b) and 25.7% in 2009 (Roberts et al. 2010). This rise in knowledge about participation must be taken together with an attitudinal climate in which the vast majority of students have a clear understanding that their role in selling sexual services is linked to their economic plight and a substantial minority has expressed a willingness to sell such services themselves. In all, the available data suggest a good degree of acceptability of, understanding toward and willingness amongst students to actively participate in the sex industry. Whilst this may have been the case over recent history, with students engaging in sex work as a flexible income generator whilst studying, we propose that this involvement has increased over the past decade. What have been lacking until now are any hard quantitative data on just how many students are actually engaged in some form of sex work. The current study hopes to address this issue.

Method

Participants and design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed with an opportunity sample of 200 full- and part-time students recruited from 29 universities in the UK. The majority of these institutions were from London (11) and the South of England (10), with others drawn from Wales, East Anglia and the North of England (8). These included a number of both pre- (13) and post-1992 (16) universities. A majority of the respondents ($N = 171$, 85.5%) were drawn from post-1992 universities. Recruitment occurred through a social science departmental participation pool in the first instance, by approaching students in a variety of different social areas of the university campus, including the Student's Union buildings, libraries and a specific social room situated in one of the university buildings. Respondents were also recruited via social media (Facebook and Twitter) and via snowballing. Women comprised 62.5% of the sample ($N = 125$, mean age = 22.32 years [SD = 4.67]) and men 37.5% ($n = 75$, mean age = 22.88 years [SD = 3.73]). Undergraduates comprised 89% of the sample ($N = 178$). The sample predominantly comprised those in full-time education ($n = 195$, 97.5%). Participants completed a semi-structured questionnaire, which is now described.

Questionnaire items

The questionnaire comprised questions concerning demographic details, information on financial and employment circumstances, physical and mental health status, drug and alcohol use, prior unwanted sexual experiences, views on student participation in various

types of sex work, and items concerning participants' role in the purchasing and provision of different types of sex work/adult entertainment.

Mental and physical health

The 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ; Goldberg and Williams 1988) was used to measure mental health. The chronic method of scoring (GHQc) was employed. A score of 1 is given to those questions endorsed with either a '3' or '4', with a cut-off score of 3 used to indicate probable psychological disorder (Goodchild and Duncan-Jones 1985). Higher scores are thus indicative of poorer well-being. Self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item scale. Physical health was measured using an inventory of 14 different physical symptoms based on those used in the UK General Household Survey (OPCS 1979). Respondents were to indicate the presence or absence of each one in the two weeks prior to questionnaire completion. In addition, a single-item measure of general health from the SF-36 health survey was used (Ware et al. 1993). A single-item self-reported measure where respondents were asked 'Do you consider yourself to have, or ever have had an eating disorder?' was also included to assess problems with eating. Respondents' levels of optimism about the future were measured by means of a single-item visual analogue scale, anchored by the labels optimistic and pessimistic at each end of the scale. A 10-point scale was derived for this with scores above 5 indicating an optimistic outlook and scores below 5 a pessimistic outlook.

Sexual abuse history

Previous sexual abuse was ascertained by asking whether respondents had ever been forced or frightened by someone into doing something sexually that they did not want, together with the respondents' age when this first occurred. In line with previous research (Roberts et al. 2004), whether this occurred prior to 13 years of age provided the operational criteria for child sexual abuse.

Health behaviour

A range of health behaviours was also assessed. These included alcohol use (units of alcohol consumed during the preceding week), smoking (numbers of cigarettes smoked) and recreational drug use (a summary score was calculated based on the number of different drugs currently used). The four CAGE screening questions (Have you ever felt you needed to Cut down on your drinking? Have people Annoyed you by criticizing your drinking? Have you ever felt Guilty about drinking? Have you ever felt you needed a drink first thing in the morning (Eye-opener) to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?) were used to estimate the presence of problem drinking (Mayfield, McLeod, and Hall 1974) with a cut off score of greater than 2 employed.

Financial and occupational circumstances

Items enquired into amount of debt, size of student loan, degree of difficulty experienced in paying bills, and the number of hours worked in paid employment outside university.

Occupations and sex work

Respondents were asked their views regarding the acceptability of student participation in the sex industry, and whether they knew of any students (male or female) who had participated in sex work to help support themselves financially. In addition participants were asked to indicate by means of yes or no answers whether they were employed in a range of different types of work. Thirty-six different occupations were listed of which 12 were concerned with different types of work in the sex industry (e.g. stripping,[3] lap dancing, table dancing, escorting, prostitution and pornography). Questions were also put to the respondents regarding their own participation in a number of different types of sex work and adult entertainment – whether they had visited pole/lap dancing clubs, strip clubs, massage parlours, escort agencies or used Internet pornography.

Analysis

The relationships between student participation in sex work (as both providers and consumers) and a variety of categorical variables (gender, presence of alcohol problems, prior sexual abuse, difficulty paying bills, prior debt, eating problems or mental health problems) were examined by cross-tabulation. For 2×2 tables, probabilities were computed using Fisher's exact test, otherwise χ^2 tests of association were used.

The relationships between student sex work and a number of continuous variables (e.g. amount of debt, current student loan, hours working outside of academic study, hours of study, and optimism) were examined by means of independent *t*-tests and linear regression models.

Logistic regression models were used to examine the predictors of participation in sex work, both individual types of work and a composite indicative of participation in any kind of sex work. Various indices of model fit are reported – model χ^2, log-likelihood χ^2, Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness of fit test, Cox and Snell R^2, and Nagelkerke R^2. Utilisation of various kinds of sex work/adult entertainment was similarly modelled. Predictors were chosen on the basis of the results of analyses.

All analyses were conducted using SPSS (16.0).

Results

Descriptive statistics

Mental and physical health status

The mean GHQc score was 2.59 (SD = 3.13). Seventy-five respondents (37.5%) met criteria for probable psychological disorder. The mean score on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale was 23.69 (SD = 2.64) and the mean symptom score from the General Household Survey items was 2.27 (SD = 2.24). Eating problems were reported by 12.5% of the sample ($n = 25$). Only three individuals (1.5%) described themselves as being in 'poor' health, with 18 (9.0%) describing their health as 'fair', 88 (44.0%) as 'good', 71 (35.5%) as 'very good' and 20 (10.0%) as 'excellent'. The mean optimism score was 7.25 (SD = 2.11).

Health behaviour

Just under one-third ($n = 59$, 29.5%) described themselves as smokers. The mean number of cigarettes smoked daily was 7.70 (SD = 5.65). The mean recreational drug use score was 0.66 (SD = 1.2) with just under one-third ($n = 62$, 31.0%) indicating some current use of illicit drugs. Mean weekly alcohol consumption was 9.56 units (SD = 12.70), with

74 (37%) reporting themselves as having abstained during the previous week. From the CAGE questionnaire, 17.5% (35/200) of the sample met criteria for a drinking problem.

Sexual abuse history

Almost one-seventh of the sample (13.5%, $n = 27$), reported previous unwanted sexual experiences. All except one of these were female. Of the 27 almost a fifth (again all females) of those ($n = 5$) met the criteria for child sexual abuse.

Financial and occupational circumstances

Almost two-thirds of the sample reported currently being in debt ($n = 126$, 63%). Eleven individuals (5.5%) reported that they were in debt prior to beginning their studies. The overall mean amount of debt was £18,828 (range £300–75,000). Less than one in four ($n = 47$, 23.5%) reported no difficulty in paying bills. Of the rest, 25% ($n = 50$) reported very little difficulty, 43.5% ($n = 87$) some or slight difficulty, and 5% ($n = 10$) a great deal of difficulty. A majority ($n = 127$, 63.5%) indicated they had a part-time job, working on average 15.61 h/week (SD = 7.93). Over half of these ($n = 65$, 51.2%) reported that they had missed lectures or seminars because of their job. Sixteen people (8%) indicated that they had considered abandoning their course for financial reasons.

Sex work: knowledge and attitudes

A majority of respondents ($N = 149$, 74.5%) were aware that students work in the sex industry. The general view was that this was considered unacceptable ($N = 112$, 56%) in contrast with a minority ($N = 32$, 16%) who considered it acceptable. No gender differences in acceptability were found ($p = 0.53$). Unsurprisingly, those who indicated they currently worked in the industry were more likely to find it acceptable (58.3% cf. 13.3%, odds ratio = 10.17, $p = 0.001$). Three in 10 ($N = 60$) of the sample reported that they knew someone involved in some branch of the sex industry (pole dancing, lap dancing, stripping, escorting, prostitution, pornography industry) to pay for their education. Excluding those who reported working in the industry yields a revised figure of 25.5% ($N = 48/188$) of the sample knowing someone directly involved. Knowledge was equally present in both women (29.6%) and men (30.7%). A majority of the sample considered that both the National Union of Students (NUS) ($N = 106$, 53%) and the University ($N = 119$, 59.5%) could do more to provide support to students working in the sex industry.

Sex work: providers

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of respondents who indicated they worked in specific branches of the sex industry. In presenting these results we have chosen to group pole dancing,

Table 1. Student participation in sex work (by type of sex work).

	n	Percentage
Pole/lap/table/topless/erotic dancing	8	4
Stripping	5	2.5
Escorting/prostitution	1	0.5
Any type of sex work	12	6

lap dancing, table dancing, topless dancing and erotic dancing under the same overall category of erotic dancing.[4] Given this classification three broad classes of sex work were chosen in our sample, with the most frequent being erotic dancing followed by stripping and escorting. Overall, 12 participants (6%) (SE = 1.683, 95% CI = 2.7–9.3) indicated they worked in some branch of the sex industry, and all but one of these were undergraduate students.

Participation and confiding in others

Of the 12 who engaged in some kind of sex work, 10 (83.3%) reported that they had told someone else about their job. Friends were the most frequent confidants ($N = 9$), followed by partners ($N = 5$), and lastly family ($N = 4$) and fellow students ($N = 4$). No differences in self-esteem ($p = 0.83$) or mental health ($p = 0.12$) were found between those who had told someone about their work and those who had not. There was some indication that those who had told someone had more alcohol problems ($p = 0.016$) and engaged in more illicit drug use ($p = 0.025$). There was also a suggestion that those with no prior history of sexual abuse were more likely to confide in someone else about the nature of their work (77.8% cf. 50%, odds ratio = 2.00, $p = 0.11$).

Sex workers' views: self, others, job and support

Although half of the sex workers considered that their view of themselves had changed as a result of doing the job, the percentage was not significantly higher than for those doing other types of work (50% cf. 37%, $p = 0.54$). One quarter ($N = 3$) reported that their views of men had changed as a result of their work.

Sex workers were more likely to agree with the proposition that the job provides a lifestyle that would be unattainable in other lines of work (50.0% cf. 18.0%, odds ratio = 4.54, $p = 0.019$). This was consistent with their reported earnings in the previous week, which were significantly greater than those for non-sex workers (£646.86 cf. £155.72, $t(115) = 5.87$, $p < 0.0005$). Five of the 12 indicated that they intended to continue their line of work after their studies were completed. Again this was not significantly different from non-sex workers (41.7% cf. 31.1%, $p = 0.52$).

Finally, those in sex work were significantly less likely to endorse the item that the university could do more to provide support to sex workers (25.0% cf. 62.0%, odds ratio = 0.204, $p = 0.015$). Further logistic regression analysis found that this relationship was unaffected ($p = 0.014$) related to levels of pessimism or self-esteem. However, further analysis revealed that the relationship between sex work and university support was reduced to non-significance ($p = 0.10$) once the perceived acceptability of sex work was controlled for. Those considering student participation in sex work unacceptable were more likely to think the NUS could do more (59.5% cf. 40.6%, odds ratio = 1.46, $p = 0.07$).

Correlates of student sex work

Demographic characteristics

Of the 12 respondents who reported engaging in some kind of sex work, all bar one were female. The male concerned reported stripping. No significant differences in age were found between sex workers and others (23.3 cf. 22.5, $t(196) = 0.59$, $p = 0.56$). There was no association between participation in sex work and family income background ($\chi 2(2) = 1.60$, $p = 0.45$) or between participation in sex work and type of university attended[5] (pre/post 1992) ($p = 0.18$).

Health and health behaviour

No significant relationships were found between participation in sex work and a number of mental and physical health indicators; for self-esteem ($t(195) = 1.23$, $p = 0.22$), GHQc ($t(198) = 0.087$, $p = 0.93$), drug use ($t(195) = 1.23$, $p = 0.22$), self-reported physical health ($t(198) = 0.43$, $p = 0.67$), physical symptom score ($t(197) = -1.53$, $p = 0.13$) and self-reported eating problems ($p = 1.00$). However, there was some suggestion that those engaged in sex work were more likely to have a prior history of sexual abuse (36.4% cf. 12.2%, odds ratio = 4.09, $p = 0.046$) and to have a current alcohol problem (25% cf. 7.4%, odds ratio = 4.14, $p = 0.07$).

Financial, occupational and educational circumstances

Sex workers were no more likely to be in debt than others (66.7% cf. 63.4%, $p = 1.00$) though were more likely to report being in debt prior to their studies (30% cf. 5.9%, odds ratio = 6.86, $p = 0.029$). They reported currently being in more debt, though not significantly so (£21,658 cf. 13,954, $t(198) = 1.09$, $p = 0.28$), and anticipated a shorter time to pay off their debts, though again the difference was not significant (67.32 months cf. 100.64, $t(103) = -0.81$, $p = 0.42$). In line with this, those in sex work were less likely to report difficulty in paying bills ($n = 7$, 58.3% cf. 140, 76.9%) though the association was not significant ($p = 0.27$).

Sex workers were more likely to be part-time students ($n = 2$ (16.7%) cf. $N = 3$ (1.6%), odds ratio = 12.34, $p = 0.03$) and were more likely to have considered abandoning their course for financial reasons ($n = 3$ (25%) cf. $N = 13$ (6.9%), odds ratio = 4.49, $p = 0.059$). The number of hours worked did not differ between those engaged in sex work and those engaged in other part-time work (16.41 cf. 15.52, $t(120) = 0.37$, $p = 0.71$), although there was a noticeable difference in study hours. Those engaged in sex work studied on average for almost eight fewer hours per week (12.63 cf. 20.71, $t(196) = -1.89$, $p = 0.061$). However, a factorial general linear model revealed that this difference was no longer significant once full-/part-time status was controlled for ($p = 0.29$), though marked differences were still present amongst both part-time students who were sex workers (7.00 cf. 14.33 h) and full-time students who were sex workers (13.89 cf. 20.80 h).

Correlates of student sex work by type of sex work

Use of a composite variable to assess participation in sex work does not preclude the possibility that different types of work have quite different correlates. To examine this, stripping and erotic dancing were each cross-tabulated against a history of prior sexual abuse, mental health problems (as indicated by GHQ scores) and alcohol problems. Numbers for escorting were too low to permit meaningful analysis.

Presence/absence of a history of sexual abuse was associated with erotic dancing/non-dancing (42.9% cf. 12.5%; odds ratio = 5.25, $p = 0.054$), though there was no association with stripping (20.0% cf. 13.4%; $p = 0.52$). Evidence suggested that having an alcohol problem was associated with stripping (40.0% cf. 7.7%, odds ratio = 8.0, $p = 0.059$) and to a lesser degree erotic dancing (25% cf. 7.8%, odds ratio = 3.93, $p = 0.14$), though this was not significant. Finally, presence/absence of a mental health problem was not associated with either erotic dancing (50.0% cf. 37.0%, $p = 0.48$) or stripping (20.0% cf. 37.9%, $p = 0.65$). These results are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary: statistical correlates of types of sex work.

	Stripping	Erotic dancing
Mental health problem	No	No
Alcohol problem	Yes	Perhaps
Prior sexual abuse	Yes	No

Multivariate analysis: predicting participation in sex work

A logistic model, comprising presence of an alcohol problem, full-/part-time status, having considered abandoning study for financial reasons, prior debt, difficulty paying bills and a prior history of sexual abuse, was constructed to predict engaging in sex work of any kind. This model was not significant (Model $\chi^2(6) = 9.09$, $p = 0.16$, -2 log likelihood $= 63.25$) though it had an acceptable fit with the data (Hosmer and Lemeshow test $\chi^2(8) = 8.47$, $p = 0.39$). Pseudo R^2 measures suggested a weak model with values ranging from 6.2% for the Cox and Snell R^2 to 15.5% for Nagelkerke's R^2. Individually, only prior debt was significant after simultaneously controlling for other variables (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.04$, $p = 0.04$). This model was then applied to predict knowledge of sex workers in the particular categories of stripping and erotic dancing. Results are summarised in Table 3 below.

Sex work: purchasers

As can be seen from Table 4, both male and female students have been engaged in the demand side of the sex industry as purchasers and consumers of a variety of sexual services. Internet pornography was chief amongst these ($N = 79$, 39%), followed by visits to strip clubs ($N = 48$, 24%), pole dancing/lap dancing clubs ($N = 31$, 15.5%), massage parlours ($N = 13$, 6.5%) and escort agencies ($N = 3$, 1.5%).[6]

Correlates of student sex-work consumers/purchasers

Sex-work consumers were more likely to be in debt (69.9% cf. 56.8%, odds ratio $= 1.76$, $p = 0.08$), to have a part-time job (69.9% cf. 57.3%, odds-ratio $= 1.73$, $p = 0.08$) and to have higher levels of debt (£13,699.27 cf. £7354.23, $t(198) = 3.15$, $p = 0.002$) and drug use ($t(198) = 4.44$, $p < 0.0005$).

No significant age difference was found between sex-work consumers and others (22.8 cf. 22.4, $t(196) = 0.78$, $p = 0.44$). There was no association with type of university attended ($p = 0.54$), family income background ($\chi^2(2) = 0.35$, $p = 0.84$), being in debt prior to studies ($p = 1.0$), having an alcohol problem ($p = 0.32$), a prior history of sexual abuse ($p = 1.0$) or having considered abandoning study for financial reasons ($p = 0.30$). No significant differences were found in relation to self-esteem

Table 3. Predicting sex work.

Type of sex work	Predictors	Pseudo R^2	Model
All sex work	Prior debt*	6.2%–15.5%	$\chi^2(6) = 9.09$, $p = 0.16$
Stripping	Difficulty paying bills*	11.2%–42.6%	$\chi^2(6) = 16.84$, $p = 0.01$**
Erotic dancing	No predictors significant	5.2%–17.5%	$\chi^2(6) = 7.54$, $p = 0.27$

Note: Values for Pseudo R^2 shown are Cox and Snell R^2 and Nagelkerke's R^2. *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$.

Table 4. Student consumers/purchasers of sex work.

	Male	Female	All	*p*
Visit to pole dancing/lap dancing club	16 (21.3%)	15 (12.%)	31 (15.5%)	0.10*
Visit to strip club/bar	26 (34.7%)	22 (17.6%)	48 (24.0%)	0.01**
Massage parlour	8 (10.7%)	5 (4%)	13 (6.5%)	0.08*
Escort agency	0	3 (2.4%)	3 (1.5%)	0.29
Internet pornography	38 (50.7%)	41 (32.8%)	79 (39.5%)	0.02**
Dominatrix	0	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.5%)	1.00
Any other sexual services	3 (4%)	1 (0.8%)	4 (2.0%)	0.15
Any	48 (64.0%)	56 (44.8%)	104 (52.0%)	0.009***

*$p \leq 0.10$; **$p \leq 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

($t(195) = 0.52$, $p = 0.60$), mental health ($t(198) = -0.33$, $p = 0.74$), self-reported physical health ($t(198) = -0.96$, $p = 0.34$), physical symptom score ($t(197) = -0.20$, $p = 0.84$), number of hours worked (16.46 cf. 14.50, $t(120) = 1.36$, $p = 0.18$) or number of study hours (20.28 cf. 20.22, $t(196) = 0.03$, $p = 0.98$).

Multivariate analysis: predicting sex-work consumers/purchasers

A logistic model, comprising full-/part-time status, debt status, amount of debt and degree of illicit drug use, was constructed to predict sex-work consumption. This model was significant (Model $\chi^2(4) = 27.31$, $p < 0.0005$, -2 log likelihood $= 242.77$) and had an acceptable fit with the data (Hosmer and Lemeshow test $\chi^2(6) = 3.44$, $p = 0.75$). Pseudo R^2 measures suggested a weak model with values ranging from 13.1% for the Cox and Snell R^2 to 17.4% for Nagelkerke's R^2. Individually, amount of debt (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.51$, $p = 0.034$) and degree of drug use (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 12.76$, $p < 0.0005$) were significant predictors after simultaneously controlling for other variables.

Discussion

The results from this study show similar levels of acceptability/unacceptability in the views of students towards student engagement in sex work to those reported by Roberts et al. (2010). Around one in six respondents in the current survey (16%) considered it acceptable compared to a figure of 12% reported earlier. Unlike the earlier study, however, no gender differences in acceptability were evident. Further comparisons with the earlier work show that the proportion of survey respondents who reported knowing other students involved in the sex industry to pay for their education has risen from 25.7% to 30% in the current study period. This difference, however, is not significant ($p = 0.29$), which could be interpreted as suggesting the numbers of students engaged in sex working have stabilised. Such a conclusion would probably be premature. As no prior research has been undertaken in which students have been directly asked whether they are engaged in sex work, any definitive answer to this question is not possible. This study, however, has for the first time gathered such data and provides us with an estimate of between 2.7% and 9.3% (mean $= 6\%$) of the student population participating in some branch of sex work, in the form of either erotic dancing, stripping or escorting. If anything, this figure is likely to be an underestimate of the true scale of the phenomenon as there are most likely to be many more students working in direct sexual services such as prostitution and escorting.

Whilst the data suggest stripping and erotic dancing are more frequent amongst the sample than escorting, and despite these activities being more public and less stigmatised

than escorting or prostitution, the ratio of knowledge of escorting to actual involvement in it is at 28:1 much greater than the ratio of knowledge of erotic dancing to involvement in it (4.82:1) which was found in the sample. In other words, a good deal more people in the sample appear to know about students involved in escorting than one would expect if the reported involvement in escorting provided a true estimate. Further reasons for considering the present estimates to be conservative concern the absence of phone sex workers in the sample as well as the absence of men selling sexual services when there are already reports of student involvement in both these spheres (see, for example, Anonymous [2012] and Dixon [2012] for a discussion of male medical students working as escorts and following Channel 4's programme devoted to the subject, and Robertson [2012] for a discussion of students working as phone sex workers). Finally, as the overall levels of debt observed in this study are below those observed in recent national studies, the economic 'push' to sex work present in this sample may be less than elsewhere. We might add that whilst clearly much more work on a larger scale needs to be conducted, it is worth mentioning that the figure of 6% that we have obtained stands above the 3.4% of students who when first asked in 1999 (Roberts et al. 2000) reported knowing students working in the sex industry to pay for their education. Although the past decade of further economic and social mainstreaming of the sex industries may have led to an increase in disclosure of existing activities (Brents and Sanders 2010), that the number of students gainfully employed in sex work has increased since the turn of the century cannot really be doubted, despite some efforts to ignore or deny it (e.g. Olohan 2004; Davis 2011).

On the basis of the fees that these students pay,[7] the income derived from students who work in the sex industry can be estimated from the above proportions. The most recently available data on student numbers in higher education (Universities UK 2011) put full-time undergraduate students from the UK at 1.16 million, which, if our survey data are representative of the UK as a whole, would mean between £103.1 and £355.2 million per year is entering the UK higher education economy via the sex industry. For each of the 165 institutes of higher education, this averages out at between £0.62 million and £2.15 million each year. Such figures add further weight to the view that the sex industries are 'of major economic significance in the cultural capitalism of the twenty-first century' (McNair 2002, 6). Furthermore, there is robust evidence that these industries, particularly the strip-based industry, are strongly reliant on student labour (Sanders and Hardy 2012). Sanders (2012) demonstrates how students (along with migrants) are a core group of young women who are a supply group of transient labour into the licensed strip industries in the UK, with club managers relying on the flexible, mobile and constant availability of this group of workers to operate their businesses. It is this group of young women who often enter the strip industry for petty cash, sometimes attracted to the work more as a lifestyle choice where they can enjoy hedonistic pleasures of working in the night time economy. Yet because this group of women are affected by the poor employment opportunities for graduates, they can end up staying much longer in sex work than anticipated (Sanders 2012).

The analyses presented here suggest that there is little predictability as to which students will opt to work providing commercial sexual services. Certainly, there is little evidence that those who do are in any way psychologically different from those who do not. Though the data suggest those with a prior history of sexual abuse have a statistically elevated chance of engaging in sex work, this relationship vanishes once financial circumstances are controlled for. The only other differences of note were that those engaged in sex work were more likely to be in debt prior to their studies and to be part-time students, with part-time status once again no longer significant with debt controlled for. The present results thereby add support to previous work (Roberts et al. 2000; Roberts,

Bergström, and La Rooy 2007b; Roberts et al. 2010) which has firmly implicated financial factors as being a major driving force behind student participation in the sexual economy. Though there was no significant relationship between sex-work participation and social class per se (as measured by income background), the fact that the majority of the sample came from middle income groups, as is common in the university sector, is further evidence of the middle-class move into sex work (Bernstein 2007) and its increased perceived 'respectability'.

Evidence is equivocal on the putative benefits of sex work for students. On the one hand, those who were engaged in it had significantly greater incomes from their part-time work compared to others and were more likely to express the view that their job provided them with a lifestyle that would be unattainable otherwise. On the other hand, there was little evidence of the presumed pay-off in greater free time to study compared to other lower-paid work. First, no differences in hours worked were found between sex workers and others, and second, those in sex work actually studied for less time than their counterparts. Though the difference was not significant after adjustment for part-time status, the difference was still pronounced. Given that one of the accepted motivations for entering higher education is to improve one's pay prospects, these data in fact raise the possibility that employment in the sex industry, at least in certain branches of it, may actually reduce motivation to study given the relatively higher financial rewards. However, it must not be forgotten that the current data are dependent on the pattern and type of sex work observed in this sample, which for the most part comprised various forms of erotic dancing and stripping. Hence, the picture just described may not be true of all forms of sex work. The one person to indicate that they were working as an escort, a full-time student, did work considerably fewer hours compared to her counterparts (4.00 cf. 15.72) and whilst unfortunately no data on study hours were available for this person, they did have the second highest ratio of earned income per hour worked of the entire sample (£100/hour). Thus, there is partial corroboration of the presumed pay-off for students in participating in sex work.

With regards to the demand side of the sexual service industry equation, there were again no obvious adverse psychological factors driving respondents' behaviour. The data here with regards to both provision and consumption of sexual services are consistent with the workings of a highly sexualised culture (Sanders 2008), which has not only permeated the lives of men and women in general, but also with the profound changes in the funding and provision of higher education in recent years has impacted upon the lifestyles of many students, both male and female, where aspects of sexual consumption now seem normative. Of interest, we found that there was a highly significant association between how acceptable it was seen to be for students to be working in the sex industry and the degree to which our respondents saw themselves as consumers in paying for their education ($\chi^2(12) = 27.45, p = 0.007$), with higher levels of unacceptability linked with seeing oneself as a consumer. What this may suggest is that the financial restructuring of higher education may be bringing a more conservative set of political attitudes in its wake, in that the more students adopt the identity of an educational consumer the more they adopt an attitude set, situated within a particular conservative moral universe. It can also be noted that consumers of the products of this sexualised culture are readily to be found amongst young people, with this being one of the factors which may be driving them further into debt as the 'live (desire and consume) now pay (and suffer) later' pleasure dynamic that saturates late capitalism rolls on, unchallenged in the very sectors of society where previously one might have expected to find some resistance. A potential danger is that with the recession continuing to eat into the living standards of ordinary wage earners,

students living on loans with payback of their debt postponed beyond the immediate future may be prey to the machinations of an industry seeking further expansion on the back of their future poverty.

Limitations and conclusions

It is of course necessary to place a number of caveats on these results. The research begs more questions than it answers. We would have liked to collect considerably more data than we have been able to. That we did not is in part due to an unnecessary delay incurred during the process of obtaining ethical clearance to conduct this study – one of many incumbent risks when undertaking research work into the sex industry (Roberts, Bergström, and La Rooy 2007a; Roberts 2010), which continues to be affected by the institutional fear disseminated from the academic management hierarchy into local ethics committees, which have been reluctant to openly sanction investigations into student sex work. On this occasion, objections were raised to asking questions which have previously been cleared in the same institution and used in numerous previous studies by other authors. The result of this delay meant that the period of data collection was pushed back to a time when many students were unavailable through being off campus or on holiday. A question therefore arises as to whether the sample recruited following this delay is representative of the general student population. The proportion of undergraduate students in this sample (89%) is greater than the proportion found in the overall population (77%) (Universities UK 2011), suggesting some over-sampling of undergraduates. However, the profile of the sample in terms of age and proportion of undergraduates is broadly similar to previous published work (Roberts et al. 2000), suggesting that any bias arising from the sampling period is not unduly great, with the sampling period affecting the sample size rather than the representativeness of those who would normally be available on campus to be sampled. The available data indicate students participating in sex work are drawn from both old (pre-1992) and new (post-1992) universities, though with the limitations arising from sample size it is premature to answer definitively whether it is more prevalent in one type of institution. Similarly, although respondents have been sampled from throughout the UK the current data permit no conclusions to be drawn regarding the geographical distribution of participation. We would not be surprised however if subsequent research was to show a relationship between participation in sex work and the economic health of the area in which they were residing. We believe however, that whilst relatively small, the study does permit us to draw some conclusions of worth and is of importance for two reasons – first, that no previous work has been able to collect any data on students' own reported involvement in the sex industry – either as providers or purchasers, and second, with the near tripling of tuition fees on the horizon (from autumn 2012), when average debt levels are predicted to reach £53,400 for new students (Push.co.uk 2011), these data provide a valuable benchmark for assessing the impact of the new fees arrangement on student participation in the sex industry.

As has been argued previously (Roberts et al. 2010), findings from studies of students and the sex industry have implications for policy, which must take seriously the relationship between debt in students and supply routes into the sex industry. We reiterate that, 'appropriate responses are required from organisations that either represent students (e.g. the NUS) or those that have a duty of care and benefit from their presence (the universities)' (Roberts et al. 2010, 154). Sanders and Campbell (2012), in their dissemination and impact study of findings relating to students' engagement in stripping, have worked with the Women's Officers of the National Union of Students to highlight

this issue and encourage an evidence-based approach to providing support and guidance, rather than a politically ideological stance that does not help or support those students who continue to work in the sex industry whilst at university. Equally, research partnerships have been forged between the NUS (Wales) and a three-year project that looks at interactive health services for student sex workers, with the hope that some policies and protocols can be established to address the issue of student sex work (Sagar and Jones 2012). Given it has already been established (Cusick, Roberts, and Paton 2009) that Higher Education establishments have failed to take into account the need for policies on student or staff involvement in sex work, there is considerable work to be done in both awareness and policy development.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Yasmine Bui, Elise Madden and Stephanie Cook for help with data collection, as well as all those who participated in the research.

Notes

1. As of July 2011, current average levels of graduate debt stand at £21,198 (push.co.uk – see also D'arcy 2011).
2. According to Channel 4 News, the list of universities with students signed up to the website includes Cambridge ($n = 46$), LSE ($n = 51$), Nottingham ($n = 61$) and Kent ($n = 57$).
3. The current survey has not employed precise technical distinctions between the different types of work. Whilst lap dancing, for example, may be performed in publicly licensed strip clubs and striptease at privately organised functions, we have opted for reasons of brevity and survey design to initially employ a variety of terms that are recognised in everyday discourse. These may of course be grouped/organised in a variety of ways. See later text.
4. Whether, and in what way, respondents perceive differences between some of these types of work is beyond the remit of this study though certainly warrants future investigation.
5. Three respondents participating in sex work were studying at pre-1992 universities.
6. Of these three, one of the respondents was working as an escort.
7. £3290 per annum.

References

Anonymous. 2012. Confessions of a student prostitute. *StudentBMJ* 20: e906.

Attwood, F. 2006. Sexed up: Theorizing the sexualization of culture. *Sexualities* 9, no. 1: 77–94.

Barrett, D. 1997. Students on the game. *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, July 18.

BBC News. 2004. Student sells virginity on web. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/bristol/3429769.stm (accessed January 2004).

Bernstein, E. 2007. Sex work for the middle classes. *Sexualities* 10, no. 4: 473–88.

Brents, B., and T. Sanders. 2010. The mainstreaming of the sex industry: Economic inclusion and social ambivalence. Special issue. *Journal of Law & Society; Regulating Sex/Work: From Crime Control to Neo-liberalism* 37, no. 1: 40–60.

Brinkworth, L. 2007. Students who sell sex. *Cosmopolitan*, July: 60–2.

Channel 4 News. 2012. Hard-up students seek help from sugar daddy website. http://www.channel4.com/news/hard-up-students-seek-help-from-sugar-daddy-website (accessed May 2012).

Chapman, M. 2001. Red light finds its way onto campus. *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, November 5.

Cusick, L., R. Roberts, and S. Paton. 2009. Higher and further education institution policies on student and staff involvement in commercial sex. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 31, no. 2: 185–95.

D'arcy, S. 2011. Drowning in debt – Student finances revealed. *The Student*. http://www.studentnewspaper.org/features/457-drowning-in-debt-student-finances-revealed (accessed July 2012).

Davis, R. 2011. Student by day … lap-dancer by night. *The Guardian*, February 15. http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/feb/15/lap-dancing-students-funding-studies (accessed July 2011).
Dixon, J. 2012. Medical schools' attitudes towards student prostitution. *StudentBMJ* 20: 16–18.
Dolman, K. 2008. Selling sex to study. *The Times*. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/student/article3396280.ece (accessed February 19, 2008).
Duvall Smith, A. 2006. Thousands of students 'join sex trade to fund degrees'. *The Independent*. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/europe/thousands-of-students-join-sex-trade-to-fund-degrees-422287.html (accessed October 31, 2006).
Goldberg, D.P., and P. Williams. 1988. *A user's guide to the General Health Questionnaire*. Windsor: NFER-Nelson.
Goodchild, M.E., and P. Duncan-Jones. 1985. Chronicity and the general health questionnaire. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 146, no. 1: 55–61.
Lantz, S. 2005. Students working in the Melbourne sex industry: Education, human capital and the changing patterns of the youth labour market. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, no. 4: 385–401.
Mayfield, D., G. McLeod, and P. Hall. 1974. The CAGE questionnaire: Validation of a new alcoholism screening instrument. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 131, no. 10: 1121–3.
McLeod, E. 1982. *Working women: Prostitution now*. London: Croon Helm.
McNair, B. 2002. *Striptease culture: Sex, media and the democratization of desire*. London: Routledge.
Olohan, S. 2004. Student mental health: A university challenge? *The Psychologist* 17, no. 4: 192–5.
OPCS (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys). 1979. *General Household Survey 1977*. London: HMSO.
Push.co.uk. 2011. Fees will rocket student debts over £50k, Push survey reveals. http://www.push.co.uk/Fees-will-rocket-student-debts-over-50k-Push-survey-reveals (accessed July 2012).
Roberts, R. 2010. Researching students in sex work: Market values and academic freedom. *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy* 10, no. 1: 12–17.
Roberts, R., S. Bergström, and D. La Rooy. 2007a. Commentary: UK students and sex work: Current knowledge and research issues. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 17, no. 2: 141–6.
Roberts, R., S. Bergström, and D. La Rooy. 2007b. Sex work and students: An exploratory study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 31, no. 4: 323–34.
Roberts, R., J. Golding, T. Towell, S. Reid, S. Woodford, A. Vetere, and I. Weinreb. 2000. Mental and physical health in students: The role of economic circumstances. *British Journal of Health Psychology* 5, no. 3: 289–97.
Roberts, R., T.G. O'Connor, J. Dunn, J. Golding, and the ALSPAC study team. 2004. The effects of child sexual abuse in later family life; mental health, parenting and adjustment of offspring. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 28, no. 5: 525–45.
Roberts, R., T. Sanders, D. Smith, and E. Myers. 2010. Participation in sex work: Students' views. *Sex Education* 10, no. 2: 145–56.
Robertson, S. 2012. The next best student job: Phone sex? *The Mancunian*, April 18. http://www.student-direct.co.uk/2012/04/18/the-next-best-student-job-phone-sex/ (accessed July 2012).
Rosenberg, M. 1965. *Society and the adolescent self image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Sagar, T., and D. Jones. 2012. Interactive health: Student sex workers' project (Big Lottery). Swansea University's Centre for Criminal Justice and Criminology. http://www.swansea.ac.uk/law/criminology/researchcentre/ (accessed November 20, 2012).
Sanders, T. 2008. *Paying for pleasure: Men who buy sex*. Cullompton: Willan.
Sanders, T. 2012. The advantages and attractions of informality: Sex industry work amongst migrants and students in the UK. In *Formal, informal, and criminal economy: An outlook on Northern and Southern Europe*, ed. P. Ponsaers, P. Saitta, and J. Shapland. Leeds: Eleven Press.
Sanders, T., and R. Campbell. 2012. Sex entertainment venues: Regulating working conditions. http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/research/Regulatory_Dance/Summarylapdancedisseminationprojleedsunijune2012.pdf (accessed November 20, 2012).
Sanders, T., and K. Hardy. 2012. Devalued, deskilled and diversified: Explaining the proliferation of lap dancing in the UK. *British Journal of Sociology* 63, no. 3: 513–32.
Sedgman, J. 2004. Sex work more attractive option for students. *The World Today*, ABC, April 2.

Universities UK. 2011. Higher education in facts and figures. http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/HigherEducationInFactsAndFiguresSummer2011.pdf (accessed July 2012).

Ware, J.E., K.K. Snow, M. Kosinski, and B. Gandek. 1993. *SF-36 health survey: Manual and interpretation guide*. Boston, MA: The Health Institute, New England Medical Center.

Weitzer, R., ed. 2000. *Sex for sale: Prostitution, pornography and the sex industry*. London: Routledge.

Whitaker, M. 2001. *Actuality at school*, BBC Radio 4, June 24.