

Policy Briefing: Re-introduction of policy to support students in sex work

Date: May 2023

Audience: Welfare and Community Zone

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

Students' Union UCL passed a policy to support students in sex work in 2018 and January 2021. However, the policy has now lapsed. In the previous policy, Students' Union UCL committed to the following:

- To support sex worker led organisations, such as the English Collective of Prostitutes, SWARM, Sex Worker Alliance Ireland, and SCOT-PEP, who work to improve the lives of sex workers across the UK and beyond.
- To campaign against any attempt to introduce the Nordic Model in the UK.
- To support student sex workers being threatened with disciplinary action based solely or in part due to their status as a sex worker.
- To support student sex workers that are being outed, targeted, faced with prejudice and discrimination or harassed in the university for their status as sex workers.

Students' Union UCL recognises that there are students within UCL who may be engaged with sex work to a certain capacity. The SU supports the students' rights to choose to engage in the industry and is committed to provide support and advice¹ as we recognise that a student's motivation can be multifaceted and driven by difficult life circumstances.

The SU lobbies against policies of expulsion or disciplining students for their involvement in sex work, harassment in the form of 'outing' or disclosing a student's status as a sex worker without their consent.

What would change if the policy was successful?

This will renew SU's current commitment and provision of resources and support services for student sex workers.

What is the relevant national / international context to this situation?

According to the Student Sex Work Project carried out by Swansea University between 2012 – 2015, 5% of students who took part in the survey had been involved in the sex industry in some capacity, whilst 20% indicated that they had considered working in the sex industry.

¹ <https://studentsunionucl.org/advice-and-support/advice/student-sex-workers#:~:text=We%20support%20a%20student's%20right,workers%20who%20visit%20our%20service.>

57% of the students who engaged in sex work for economic purposes use the income received to fund their higher education.

Some universities have openly engaged with the topic, such as University of Leicester producing a safety resource for students engaging in sex work² with tips to keep themselves safe. Out of the Russell Group universities, only three policies in place to support their students who work in the sex industry, comprise of Durham University³, The University of Manchester⁴ and Newcastle University⁵. These universities provide advice and safeguarding resources for students, including signposting for support services.

The legality of sex work and the role of universities is a source of debate, with mainstream news outlets criticising universities and affiliated student unions for 'promoting sex work'⁶ while the former Higher and Further Education Minister Michelle Donelan had called it an act of 'legitimising a dangerous industry which thrives on the exploitation of women'.⁷

In England and Wales, sex work is legal but many of the activities involved in promoting sex work are illegal under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, including soliciting (trying to get clients) on the street or other public places, owning or managing a brothel (any premises which is used by more than one person for sex work), and advertising sexual services.⁸ A number of independent NGOs are open for students to seek advice and support, therapy services and even advocacy for better working conditions and status⁹.

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

No.

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

Yes, as mentioned this relates to the lapsed UP2008 SU policy.

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder / public relations issues with this policy proposal?

No – a similar policy was in place.

Are there any sustainability implications to this item for discussion?

No.

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this item for discussion?

² <https://le.ac.uk/criminology/research/student-sex-work>

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sex-work-durham-university-students-b1956484.html>

⁴ <https://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/services/concerns/sexwork/>

⁵ <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/wellbeing/physicalwellbeing/sexualhealth/>

⁶ <https://thetab.com/uk/2021/09/20/thousands-of-students-are-sex-workers-universities-need-to-do-more-to-protect-them-222364>

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-59330713>

⁸ https://www.release.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/SEX_WORKERS_%26_THE_LAW_2017.pdf

⁹ <https://studentsunionucl.org/advice-and-support/advice/student-sex-workers> (Support Services)

If implemented, this policy would be very important in creating a safe space for students already or planning to engage in sex work.

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

The SU would continue to lobby and protect students who may face discrimination and stigmatisation associated with sex work.