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Students selling sex: marketisation, higher education and consumption

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Students selling sex: marketisation, higher education and consumption

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Robust academic research on the topic of students involved in the sex industry is in its infancy, yet the relationship appears consistent and permanent. This paper draws on findings from the largest study into the stripping industry in the United Kingdom to explore the relationships between students, sex work and consumption. To make sense of the relationship between students and participation in the sex industry, a deeper understanding of other social and cultural processes is needed. In this discussion we argue that the following points are relevant and inter-linked: changes to the nature of sexual commerce and sexual consumption as they become part of the marketplace; changes in social attitudes and the rise of 'respectability' in sexual commerce; the 'pleasure dynamic' amongst students; and changes in the higher education structure that place students as consumers as well as financially fragile. We set out a future research agenda given that this relationship is set to grow as the individual bears the cost of higher education.

Keywords: consumption; fees; higher education; striptease; sex work; students

Introduction

Much of what is known about the experiences and relationships between students and the sex industry has been through anecdotal stories that have reverberated throughout the UK media (for a review of media reporting, see Cusick, Roberts, and Paton 2009).¹ These stories continue to be reported: for example, the *Student British Medical Journal* discussed trainee doctors selling sex to pay for medical training costs in March 2012.² Indeed, the real-life story of Brooke Magnenti, who wrote the *Belle de Jour* memoirs based on her experiences of escorting 'high-end' clients whilst completing a science PhD, demonstrates the popularity of these stories and imagery, alongside other student sex workers whose stories produce publishable

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– and profitable – content.³ To some extent, the interest in this phenomenon of ‘student by day, sex worker by night’ is part of a broader cultural obsession with prostitution and sex work, as television screens and newspaper columns swing between the polarised images of the downtrodden, drug-addicted street ‘victim’, to the glamorous escort who tops up their professional earnings at night.

Media hype and sensationalism aside, these stories do point to a gender-related issue in education that needs mapping, unpacking and thinking through. The English Collective of Prostitutes has stated publicly that they have had an increase in student sex workers calling their helpline since the introduction of fees took place.⁴ Recently there is evidence that the issue is moving beyond media reporting as education and health policy-makers put student sex work on the agenda for both research and practical resource-based activities. For example, the National Union of Students⁵ have announced an apparent increase in the numbers of students in the sex industry as well as other ‘risky’ financial activities such as gambling and medical experiments, and are working as partners in the health-related three-year project ‘Interactive Health: Student Sex Workers Wales’ led by Swansea University.

Some of this concern for the student sex worker is anecdotal because the patterns and specificities of the relationship between education and sex work remain sketchy. Whilst some research has suggested estimates that around £24.8 million may be channelled into higher education (HE) institutions in the United Kingdom from student sex work activities (Roberts et al. 2010), there are still many unknowns when discussing the relationship between engagement in university education and the sex industry, leading to what Roberts et al. (2010, 14) have termed the ‘sexual economy of higher education’.

This article seeks to go beyond the sensationalised media representations of student sex work to explore these links between women’s participation in the sex industry and HE by contextualising them in the broader context of policy change and the mainstreaming of sexual commerce. We must here recognise the existence of male sex work and indeed student sex work; however, this paper and research is confined to the dominant form of female adult sex work. To achieve our aims, in this paper we first explore the existing literature on students and sex work, and outline the changes that have been made to HE in the United Kingdom over the last 20 years. After providing background on the core study from which the data are drawn, we examine the experiences of those involved in education and the sex industry, and describe how students have become embedded in the infrastructure of the stripping industry. Whilst we do not in any way suggest there is a correlational relationship between students, sex work participation and the introduction of tuition fees, we explore students’ views about why they enter the industry. Finally, in the discussion we draw some conclusions in

relation to broader issues of students selling sex, sexual consumption and the sexualisation of HE.

The changing landscape of higher education in the United Kingdom

The economics, structures and purpose of universities have undergone a vast transformation in the past two decades, lead mainly by the Blair New Labour Government and continued since 2010 under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition. Both governments draw on neo-liberal ideologies as the driving force behind the reshaping of the HE sector, holding market principles of choice, competition and diversity as the key to public-sector reform and introducing a competitive education market that now includes private ‘for-profit’ providers (for a review, see Alderman and Palfreyman 2011). The Dearing Report in 1997 (a Committee set up by the previous Conservative-led government that gave the steer for Blair’s first term in office from 1998) set out recommendations centred on the expansion of numbers in order to respond to the global economy, widening participation, and expanding quality in teaching. However, the most significant recommendation was for a new way of financing the HE sector: that individual’s should begin to bear the costs of tuition, originally suggested through a graduate contribution.

Since the Dearing Report, most of these recommendations have happened, changing the shape and nature of HE. Most significantly, the drive to increase student numbers who attend university saw a shift from 15 to 33% per cohort from 1987 – 1997, effectively introducing a mass HE system and halving the government funding per student (Lunt 2008, 742). Accompanying this expansion was the introduction of a widening participation agenda to combat access inequalities (which has had limited success, if any), and the emphasis more recently turning to the centrality of the student experience. Yet the most notable reforms are in the financing of HE. Taking the lead from the Dearing Report, in 1998 when Blair came to power there was the first introduction of up-front tuition fees and the abolition of maintenance grants, only for this to be reversed in 2004 and the up-front fees of £3225 replaced by a deferred fee payment system (Lunt 2008). Pivotal to the issue of student debt and finances was Lord Browne’s *Independent Review into Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (Browne 2010), which recommended the removal of the cap on tuition fees, effectively turning HE into a competitive market with consumers looking for value for money. This new system of financing was adopted by the Coalition Government as a way of shifting the entire cost of HE onto individuals and families and away from the public purse. From September 2012 fees ranged from £6000 to £9000 per year, which can be paid up front or through a loan (Brown 2011). Whilst those institutions charging the highest tuitions fees must invest from those fees monies into access-related

activities, and there will be bursaries available for young people from the poorest backgrounds, the landscape of HE has now changed indefinitely. One of the most concerning fallouts of these rapid and radical changes is in who will go to university. Ample research already exists on the lack of access for working-class young people into HE and that participation is unequal across society based on ethnicity and class specifically (Archer and Hutchings 2010; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). Working-class students consider HE to carry more risks and to be a costly choice, so those who are committed will have the financial costs and ways to divert debt at the forefront of their endeavours.

Tuition fees, debt and working in the informal economy

In 2011, predicted student debt in the United Kingdom rose to an average of £18,700 per student, £800 more than in 2010 (Vasagar 2011). This is only set to rise further with the introduction of higher fees by all HE institutions from 2012, with some commentators predicting debt levels of £50,000 for future graduates.⁶ Studies have indicated that a majority of students regularly engage in some form of paid work during term time in order to pay for or subsidise their education, with one-third working over 20 hours each week (Lindsay and Paton-Saltzburg 1993). Moreau and Leathwood (2007) found that paid work amongst HE students during term time was increasing, specifically amongst those young people who were ‘non-traditional’ entrants (i.e. the working class). The findings from the striptease study on which this paper is based indicated that stripping work fitted within this nexus of debt, paid work and the personal financing of HE.

We can also examine the consequences of neo-liberal marketisation of HE in other countries. Lantz’s (2005, 386) findings on the links between student sex work occurred at a time when changes to the Australian HE system had taken place: deregulation of postgraduate fees, up-front fee paying places, privatisation, and the reduction of government-funded student income support schemes. Such a neo-liberal market approach for the provision of HE meant that the core reduction of state support for students either directly or through the withdrawal of subsidised courses in universities meant that the short-fall needs to be made up in some way by the individual/family. Indeed, it can be considered that the entrepreneurial student dancers we spoke to were doing exactly what the government encourages: taking responsibility for their own education and finances through paid labour. Whilst the introduction of the fee did not start until 2012 and therefore post-dates the data discussed in this paper, the research findings demonstrate that links between female students and sex work were already an embedded aspect of student financial provision.

What do we know about student sex work?

The relationship between sex work and HE outlined in this paper adds to a small but growing number of studies and commentaries that identify a connection between these two areas of social life. ‘Lap dancing’ was identified as the most popular sector of the sex industry for students to work in (Roberts, Bergström, and Rooy 2007b), most probably due to its ‘non-contact’ status and the relative acceptance of ‘lap dancing’ as a legitimate activity compared with more direct sexual services such as prostitution. Lantz (2005) similarly found in Australia that female students were working in the illegal and legal sex industries such as table-top dancing, peep shows, brothels, massage parlours, escort agencies, and the street. Lantz’s study shows the multi-dimensional elements of the women’s identities and lives, and how sex work is one, often small, aspect of their busy and complex experiences, choices and priorities. Similar findings have been reported in France (Duvall Smith 2006) and the United Kingdom (Roberts, Bergström, and Rooy 2007b; Roberts et al. 2010) about the extent of and type of sex work students are involved in. Yet, as Lantz (2005) notes, apart from the obvious attraction of cash-in-hand payments, there is little detail known about the dynamics between student status and entrance into the sex industry.

While the link between student status and earning money through selling sexual services, directly or indirectly, may not be new, there is evidence that its prevalence or visibility may have increased over the past decade and before the introduction of fees. Roberts, Bergström, and Rooy (2007a) found that 10% of respondents knew a fellow student who was working in sexual services and students were broadly supportive of those who work in the sex industry, even if they were not working in it themselves. The number of respondents reporting that they knew students involved in sex work rose from 3.99% in 2000 to 6.3% in 2006, indicating an upward trend in student sex work participation even before the financial crisis and the introduction of high tuition fees. This indicates a growing acceptance and normalisation of sex work amongst undergraduate students in the United Kingdom, as well as potentially a growth in the numbers or proportion of students involved. The most recent quantitative study on student sex industry participation by Roberts, Jones, and Sanders (2013) notes how financial factors were the main driving force to work in the sex industry.

Beyond academic research, other sources of information from health organisations in the United Kingdom note that student sex workers have always appeared in their client base. Sexual health outreach projects across the country have considered students to be a core group, albeit a small one, who are involved in indoor sex markets. The Integrated Sexual Health Clinic in Cardiff, Wales estimate that one in three students visiting the clinic could be involved in some form of sex work (Sagar and Jones 2011). Furthermore, since the recession of 2008, local sexual health outreach

projects have reported an upsurge in the numbers of students who have set up their own websites to act as independent escorts, or work collectively from a rented flat, and that there were also illegal brothels locally that were known to hire students in term time (personal communication 2012). In Wales, five out of 30 sex worker participants who worked in off-street establishments in the Cardiff area were students, with one escort manager stating that eight out of 14 ‘girls on the books’ were students (Sagar and Jones 2011).

The striptease study & sample

This paper is a result of a large-scale Economic and Social Research Council project into the rise of the striptease industry in the United Kingdom and the experiences of those who work in it (Sanders and Hardy 2012). The design comprised a multi-method approach to gather qualitative, quantitative and visual photographic data to answer the research questions. The project was mainly based across two cities, one in the North and one in the South, repeatedly visiting 20 pubs and stripping clubs across these cities (and a small number of clubs in rural towns were visited as a point of comparison). Observations and notes were taken upon each visit. One core data collection method was an interviewer-administered survey of 197 dancers (mainly current). Forty of these surveys were completed by respondents online, where the survey was hosted (for free) on a striptease directory website, whilst three peer interviewers (current dancers) collected 40 surveys using face-to-face methods.

The prelude to the study emerged through an observation made in 2008 while in Las Vegas when the principle investigator was carrying out research on the mainstreaming of the sex industry at the University of Nevada.⁷ In this mecca of adult entertainment (colloquial know as ‘Sin City’), there were 35 strip/lap dancing/erotic dance clubs (only one of which was men stripping for women). At the same time, a northern city in England with two large universities had 12 clubs: proportionally significantly higher for the populations of the two cities and their significance within the global sex industry.⁸ Given this fact, there were questions to be asked about the relationship between the prevalence of stripping in the United Kingdom and the supply of student dancers into the industry. The project therefore set out to understand this relationship in the broader contexts of the wider sex industry, higher education policy and socio-economic change. It must be noted that this project pre-dates the implementation of the Browne changes to HE, and that this is not a project that sought to investigate any causal links between fees and student sex work. A different methodology would be required using longitudinal methods and tools to examine data from before September 2012 and data after this date when the current levels of tuition fees were introduced.

In this research, the survey asked respondents questions about the last four clubs in which they had worked, enabling a comprehensive and detailed picture of how clubs operated across the United Kingdom and the different standards experienced by dancers. In all, 45 towns and cities were recorded, with a further 16 worldwide destinations cited as places where dancers had worked. The questions in the survey focused on their individual motivations and journey into dancing; other forms of work; education; feelings about work; earnings; fines; fees; tax; unions; the advantages and disadvantages of the job; and work patterns.

A further 70 interviews were conducted to interrogate the quantitative findings. We interviewed 35 dancers, people who worked in the industry (bar staff, security, 'house mums', managers) as well as owners ($n = 20$); and 15 people involved in regulation with roles such as licensing and enforcement officers, health and safety inspectors, and police officers. SPSS was used to analyse the survey responses, and these trends were cross-analysed with the qualitative data. The mixed-method approach enabled broader work patterns to be qualified and provides a large enough sample to suggest that this study is representative of the current state of the lap dancing industry in the United Kingdom.

Although the age range of respondents was 18–52, one-third of dancers were under 25 ($n = 65$), whilst a further 44 were aged 25–29. The majority, 73.5% ($n = 119$), were aged under 25 when they started dancing, an age that traditionally coincides with attending HE. The majority were white (79.4%, $n = 108$) and did not have any children (82.9%, $n = 141$).

Stripping as a student

A key finding of the study indicated that students were a core supply source providing dancers into the adult entertainment/stripping industry. Almost one-third of respondents (29.4%, $n = 50$) were engaged in some form of education, and were using dancing as a strategy to support themselves during their studies. Within this, 60% ($n = 33$) were in full-time education and 25.5% ($n = 14$) were in part-time education, while the remainder ($n = 3$) were in evening school or taking modules one by one in home countries. This was part of a broader strategy of engagement in dancing as a form of precarious labour that enabled women to work flexibly (see Sanders and Hardy 2014, chapter 5).

The core reasons for entry into stripping by students were the high cost of HE, the lack of availability of loans and support for vocational courses and the ability to combine stripping work with the demands of educational courses, due to the flexibility it offered. Even before beginning university, some dancers prepared for the high cost of HE by starting dancing beforehand:

I'd be doing a ski-season and came back and was about to start uni and had no money. So that's why I started then I did it all the way through and then carried on. (Anna, age 27, White British)

Julia entered the adult entertainment industry when her year-long work placement that was part of her law degree came to an end. The thought of not earning money, which she had become accustomed to in the placement year, was daunting, so she started dancing:

I then realised sort of come September I was going to have to go back to uni for my final year. And by that point after a year I'd got used to earning a wage and I'd always worked through uni. (Julia, age 25, White British)

Both Anna and Julia knew friends who were dancing, so visited their friends in the club, got some advice on how to start and tried it out.

Rather than selecting dancing as a career post education, many women were in fact using it as a strategy to support themselves through HE, and sometimes further education. A 'housemum'⁹ at one of the largest clubs in London commented that students were a core part of their workforce and that the management did take their studies into account when organising the rota:

You get lots of students ... If they're training – like we've got a couple of trainee accountants, we've got a couple of girls that are training to be nurses, and they're doing it to buy their books and studies, things like that ... we let them – we – because, you know, our starting time is 9 pm – if they're a student, we're pretty good, we'll say, look, we know you're studying for exams, why don't you come in a bit later? You know, we don't restrict them.

Although undergraduate students made up the largest proportion of dancers in education, others were pursuing qualifications and career plans by taking private courses. Qualifications necessary for moving into professions such as beauty, fashion, and make-up artistry were common, so this group were paying for non-traditional education in the private education sector.

I first started dancing when I was 22 and that was to fund my separate degree from university, which was make-up artistry. Which was expensive to do and I didn't know how to fund it and a couple of my friends were dancing and I started. (Bella, age 26, White British)

Unlike university education, dancers taking these courses were not eligible for educational loans. Another woman who had done several non-university courses noted how she could only get these qualifications by earning money to pay for them and support herself during her studies. Few other jobs offered the same financial possibilities as lap dancing.

There were a group of women who were already dancers (sometimes with routine non-skilled day jobs such as working in the service or catering industry) who made plans to get qualifications as a route out of dancing and to

create a more steady future in a mainstream occupation. Heidi explains how her short-term plan to work as a stripper failed, as she ended up working in the industry for five years at the time of the interview:

I've just finished a beauty course and I'm just about to start a sports massage course. It's a private course. Obviously this [dancing] isn't forever, so you kind of do start thinking ... and it does go so quick as well, when I started I said it was only going to be temporary, only for a year and then five years down the line. (Heidi, age 26, White British)

Education was often an integral part of a broader plan to move out of the precarious and competitive world of dancing, to find a more permanent and stable job. Private courses were seen as a means to achieve social mobility, whilst stripping was the means by which the courses were achieved.

A key reason cited for involvement in dancing was the flexibility it offered in enabling women to fulfil the requirements of their course and earn sufficient income. Eerikka, a Finnish dancer who had started dancing when the company she worked for went bankrupt, was studying for a master's degree. She said that she liked dancing because:

It gives you flexibility mostly; it can give you the money so you actually have more time. I can't think of any other job that I could do that would allow me to study or yeah – it's – because there is none, because you can't live. There's nothing – you can't get no money from anywhere to survive unless someone else is paying your place. (Eerikka, age 36, Finnish)

Dancing was considered an assured income for basics such as rent and weekly maintenance; although one of the main disadvantages cited by survey respondents was not knowing how much money per shift they would take home (59% stated this as the worst aspect of the job). However, the self-employed aspect of dancing meant that dancers could work, to some extent, when they chose. Eighty-eight per cent of dancers said they could choose their own shifts, and many dancers said they could have time off (weeks/months) without penalties. One survey respondent wrote:

You can work when you want. Only have to work three days a week, still earn more than in five days a week. I like night work. It's just social. You have a laugh, even when it's crap, it's like going on a night out.

These aspects of flexibility must be considered on a continuum because more recently in follow-up observations in clubs as part of a dissemination and impact project,¹⁰ some dancers in the North East have reported having to pay a retainer to keep their slot if they want time off, or managers demanding they work every Friday and Saturday night. Nevertheless, dancers are self-employed in the UK strip industry, and whilst this status gives them few employment rights, recourse to protection in the workplace, or

opportunities to contest poor practice, there are some benefits in having no contract and no formal ties to the club.

Student dancers described the work as relatively easy: Anna commented:

It's definitely not as much [cash] as everyone thinks it is. And it's sociable, I've got lots of friends at work, I go along and I have a chat. Catch up with everyone. And it's easy. It's not hard work (Anna, age 27, White British)

There was a definite theme amongst respondents that the work was not particularly hard or difficult. Reflecting on the positive aspects of the job and the possibility of earning decent money, student dancers often saw the financial aspect as only one of the advantages to the work; being in a party atmosphere and part of the night-time economy was often a significant attraction. When asked what she considered to be the most favourable aspects of the job, Lana (age 23, White British) replied: 'It's like – just like a party night! I prefer to go to work than go out on a weekend really. I prefer to go to work than go out'. The decisions to enter the industry are complex, not only driven by financial incentive but also by the desire to engage in a 'forbidden occupation' (Colosi 2010, 4).

Students often started dancing with friends as a joint venture, drawn in by the initial excitement of engaging in a transgressive world, and the prospect of earning cash-in-hand on the night was considered a bonus. The student novices generally worked infrequently (one or two shifts per week), often only during term time away from the geographical location of their home town to reduce any possibilities of being found out by family and friends (for detail on stigma, secrecy and erotic dance, also see Bradley 2007). Students distinguished the temporariness of their life in the university town from that at home with family and friends.

Those dancers who were not students and were using dancing as their main income, and possibly as a professional career based on acting/performing skills and qualifications, showed scepticism about the skills and performance of the student dancer fraternity:

There's kind of the student group that maybe might kind of work from time to time. They see it as an extra boost of cash but [they are] not necessarily amazing at the job 'cos they don't do it enough to really know how to work. (Faith, age 34, White British)

There was a definite tension between the 'old school' dancers who were there to earn good money and not socialise, and the new, inexperienced younger women who had a range of motives for entering stripping.

Students and the infrastructure of the stripping industry

Analysing the data from owners, managers and other workers responsible for organising the clubs, it is clear that the stripping industry based in university towns and cities place ‘the student’, both as dancer and customer, at the centre of their management, marketing and business operations. Many of the clubs directly marketed their night-time economy wares to students and sought to embed the clubs within the social and economic life of the university. Nights specifically targeted at students aimed to attract male customers using gimmicks such as ‘buy one dance get one free’ and wet-t-shirt competitions. A club manager in the northern city site explained how he always put flyers out at ‘Freshers Week’ inviting female students to audition, and even had a stall close to the universities to attract new recruits. He added that September, when students returned to the city to re-commence the term, was a peak time for requests from experienced and inexperienced dancers alike to work a shift in the club. Promotional tactics such as ‘flyer-ing’ and the use of cars, such as stretch hummers, spread the visibility of the clubs across the university towns and embedded their presence in the lives of university students engaging, as labourers and consumers, in the night-time economy.

Many of the students had begun working in the club having only visited a strip club as a customer, or had worked in the night-time economy in another role such as bar or restaurant work, or started off doing bar work within the club as a ‘feeder’ role into dancing:

Some of them [dancers] are students. They’re helping to pay for the uni. So you know, it’s a way of making money ... They didn’t want to become a dancer. They were barmaids before. You know, they weren’t born to be a dancer, but now they’ve had – they’ve seen I can make a bit of money, I can help to pay for my uni. (Club owner, northern city)

It was not deemed necessary for these young women to be skilled in the art of pole-dancing. They were instead hired due to sufficient aesthetic appeal, youth and ‘fit’ with the expectations of the customers and style of the club. Other workers in the club saw this as an ‘easy money’ option for students:

You get a lot of students [as dancers] but it is easy money for them and it – it’s not hard work. The hardest part is having the guts to undress in front of a man, that’s all. But once they’ve got over that they make good money. (Doorman, northern city)

Ultimately the industry itself welcomes students; indeed, we would go so far as to say it depends on students as temporary workers who provide a key source of labour when clubs are at their busiest. Whilst we have discussed elsewhere the complexity of the supply of dancers outweighing customers leading to various levels of financial exploitation from clubs

(Sanders and Hardy 2012), there still appears to be an endless supply of students willing to work for what can often be very little money across a shift of 10 hours.

Connections to other sex markets

Whether stripping is a route into other forms of sex work and markets is a controversial and complex issue with no real data to support or refute it. Sagar and Jones (2011) found that it is not unusual for women, including students, to have held several different occupations in the off-street sex market. Our survey found that 34% of dancers reported working in another area of the sex industry (including other dance roles such as freelance and agency dancing). In terms of direct sexual services, 16% had worked in just one other area of the sex industry. Nine per cent in two other areas, 6% ($n = 7$) in three areas, 2% ($n = 3$) in four areas and just 0.8% ($n = 1$) had worked in five other areas of the industry. Opinion was divided amongst those who organised strip clubs regarding whether stripping was a route into prostitution. One female manager of brothels and strip venues for over 20 years said the cross-over between the markets was minimum as the skills and personality needed to do escorting was different to that of lap-dancing:

Lap dancers tend to think they are 'above' escorts – the no contact rule means that they are separate from bodily contact. Professional dancers are more emotionally distance, have a distant sexuality – they want to show off and show off their body.

On the other hand, a male manager thought that stripping was often the first step into prostitution as more money could be made consistently, in shorter hours and with less competition.

Dancers' opinion was also divided as to whether sexual services were taking place inside the clubs, and often it was hearsay that motivated rumours. Poppy explained:

I've never seen it{sexual services}, no, but then I've always been careful where I've worked. Cos I've never really wanted to get messed up in that sort of thing, but I know it goes on. Some private parties and things, they can get, I think, whatever they want ... the bigger clubs, they're really strict, lots of cameras. Lots of security. If you were seen letting a guy touch you, you'd be sacked, definitely. (Poppy, age 21, British/mixed heritage)

Other interviewees said that they were aware that sexual services were taking place in their current place of work. The competition between dancers, because there were so many compared with the level of custom, meant that dancers were reducing the standards and breaking the rules persistently. When asked if 'extras' were on offer in the clubs, Matilda replied:

All the time, yeah. Especially at the club I'm working at, at the moment. And I've seen more and more girls that weren't doing extras before, doing it because they see all the other girls doing it and they fear that if they don't do it, they're not going to earn money anymore ... But I – I don't – I honest – maybe that's why I'm not earning very good money at the moment at my current club because I just point blank refuse to do extras. (Matilda, age 24, White British)

Whilst we found no connections at all in our research to organised prostitution, it seems there are entrepreneurial women working in the clubs who may use stripping work as a route into other forms of direct sex work.

Explaining the connections: the 'mainstreaming' of sexual commerce, higher education policy and consumption

To make sense of the relationship between students and participation in the sex industry, a deeper understanding of a range of social, economic and cultural processes is needed. In this discussion we argue that the following points are relevant and interlinked: changes to the nature of sexual commerce and sexual consumption as they become part of the marketplace; changes in social attitudes and the rise of 'respectability' in sexual commerce; the 'pleasure dynamic' amongst students; and changes in the HE structure that turned students into consumers as well as making certain groups of students (the working class, for instance) financially fragile.

First, the nature of the contemporary sex industry, with its characteristics, visibility, and appeal to the middle classes, is an important reason why students seek both labour and pleasure through sexual consumption. Whilst there is not time to discuss complex issues such as 'emotional and sexual intimacy', the 'temporality of sexual mores', 'transformations in technology, sex and commerce' or 'discourses of respectability' (see Sanders 2008), these are all relevant for understanding the rise of sex markets, sex consumers and sex workers in contemporary society. We can look to a change in social attitudes as a pivotal reason for the increase in visibility and accessibility to the sex markets as part of consumptive behaviour and as a workplace. Despite degrees of persistent social ambivalence, stereotyping and stigma, the commercial sex industry has become relatively mainstreamed into modern-day western culture and economic structures. Brents and Sanders (2010) argue that the expansion of commercial sex has been enabled through economic processes (such as 'upscaling', gentrification and diversification), neo-liberal policies and a mellowing of social attitudes towards commercial sex to some extent. Sexual consumption has flourished in tandem with changes to the shape and nature of sexual services as they have altered, expanded, been modified and become entirely accessible on a local and global level. Coinciding with the financial and economic restructuring of the HE sector in the United Kingdom and across the

western world, sexuality and sexual consumption have become an integral part of the marketplace.

Our second point of discussion is how the normalisation of sexual consumption particularly for younger generations, as both a lifestyle to desire and to aspire to, as well as an everyday lived experience on the high street is a social world that many students inhabit (Colosi 2010). Both from McNair (2002) in his ideas of the everyday nature of the ‘striptease culture’ and from Attwood’s (2006) discussion of the ‘sexed up’ culture we live in, we learn how changes in cultural attitudes have altered our sexual behaviours. Discussed in the literature as the ‘pornification’ of society (Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa 2007), the normalisation of porn and the rise of ‘raunch culture’ that particularly targets young women, the sexualisation of society has been a core theme of the past two decades. What is interesting is that these influences, it can be argued, have led to an increased ‘respectability’ in how people view sexual services as leisure and also work. This can be increasingly said of the middle classes (Bernstein 2007). Indeed, it is the middle classes, as Bernstein demonstrates, that are increasingly the purchasers and providers of sexual services, as experiencing desire becomes a realistic lifestyle option, as well as a means through which income can be made. Therefore sexual entertainment is particularly geared up to attracting the middle classes, expelling ideas of the seedy backstreet strip joint, or the negative stereotypes of drugs and abuse that are attached to street prostitution.

The empirical work discussed in this paper supports these ideas that students are increasingly part of a culture of sexual consumption: both as providers in the form of sex workers and as consumers in the form of purchasing sex and other forms of sexual consumption through fashion, media, leisure and consumer goods. Stripping as a form of consumption and labour is increasingly acceptable because there is arguably less stigma attached to the industry. Experienced managers in our study discussed the changes in social attitudes that made their businesses viable:

I think it’s more acceptable now you see, as entertainment. Before it was like still taboo. Oh, girls take their clothes off, they’re strippers, but it’s not like that any more. Especially if you do come into a proper run club they’re really nice nights out. (Housemum of large club in the South)

Whilst maintaining an element of transgression was important to safeguard the industry’s attraction and interest, there was also an important discourse noted that stripping was just another type of entertainment in the night-time economy:

I don’t think it’s so sort of cloak and dagger anymore, do you know what I mean, it’s – well, in our clubs anyway, it’s not – just want it to be fun, do

you know what I mean, with just an extra – almost like a cabaret if you like, you know. (Female manager of club)

These liberal views contribute to the continued presence of stripping on the high street as a regulated and legal form of adult entertainment that bustles alongside the clubs, restaurants and pubs of the night-time economy. As a permanent feature of the cityscape, it is therefore no surprise that a dominant social group (i.e. students) in the towns and cities of the United Kingdom are integrated into the stripping scene. It is the increasing acceptance of commercial sex in everyday culture that has led to sex work being provided for and done by students.

Third, we argue that the student status is characterised by certain consumptive characteristics that perhaps makes this group susceptible to become buyers and providers in the sex industry. We can understand how students who ‘sell sex’ in the broadest sense are part of a wider political economy of desire and consumption. On the one hand, students are consumers of education, for which they must contribute and pay in the long term, yet at the same time revel in opportunities and increased life chances as a result of passing through the HE system. Students are consumers in other senses too. Students are a significant economic group in the United Kingdom who are targeted for their disposable income, their tendency to frequent the night-time economy possibly more than other adult age groups, and an assumed interest in fashion, leisure, technology and consumer goods. Whilst we know very little about male students as consumers of the sex industry (Roberts, Jones, and Sanders 2013), it has been argued that some students act out a ‘pleasure dynamic’ (2013, 361) consisting of a culture of gratification, hedonism and pleasure-seeking. Amongst other activities such as alcohol intake and recreational drug use, such pleasure-seeking attracts students to sexual consumption in both commercial and non-commercial relationships. As a result, selling (and buying) sex and sexualised services becomes partly acceptable.

Conclusion

This paper has added to a small body of research that attempts to understand the relationship and dynamics between students and the sex industry in an attempt to chart the relationship between the marketisation of education and the entry of students into the sex work labour force (Roberts et al. 2000, 2010). We have offered new empirical evidence and contextualised these findings in the broader context of the changing political economy of HE and global economic and social processes leading to the mainstreaming of sexual commerce. Primarily using data from a project on stripping, we now know more about the motivations for students entering the sex industry, and the possible pressures resulting from the creeping financial restructuring of HE over the past decade.

Whilst students working in the sex industry is not a new phenomenon, and there are social reasons why disclosing such forms of income-generating strategies are more acceptable now, there are outstanding questions about the relationship. To test any hypothesis that would interrogate whether the need to pay tuition fees does indeed correlate with increased student sex work participation, comparative longitudinal research would be needed. Still, after the overhaul implemented by Browne and the general concern that there will be changes in who goes to university, there are questions to be asked specifically about working-class women (and men) whom increasingly look to informal economy work such as the sex industry to generate income to put themselves through university. For the future, we need to ask whether this will be an increasing phenomenon; will students stay in sex work after their education has finished? For instance, more research needs to be done on the trajectories of student sex workers: that is, their journey into, during, and out of the sex industry. Whilst this project revealed some indicators of trajectories in the stripping industry (see Sanders and Hardy 2014), we particularly need to understand more about potential trapping factors or cycles that 'keep' educated young women in the industry. If this dynamic is one that is set to be permanent, even increasing, questions need to be asked about the health, welfare and safety considerations that organisations responsible for students should be pre-empting and responding to proactively.

Students using sex work to generate income needs to be understood in relation to the national landscape of young people's employment options. A recent government bulletin reported:

The unemployment rate and level for 16–24 year olds are higher now than at any time since comparable data began in 1992. (Rhodes 2012)

In the context of rising youth unemployment, part-time work options in the formal economy are both highly competitive and reduced in number. With possibly prolonged poor graduate employment prospects for the foreseeable future, there are questions about how students leave the industry, if at all, on completing their degree. Such questions need to be answered in the light of present misconceptions about the costs of getting a degree and the financial implications of studying (Moore, McNeill, and Halliday 2011).

Whilst education policy and practice catch up with lived realities, students (mainly female) will continue to be a core supply group into the sex industries. The gender and class dynamics are important here. Female students, particularly those from less affluent families, will perhaps increasingly turn to the informal economy to earn cash-in-hand as an instant means of financial support, without having to seek out formal work and commit to shift patterns and extensive set hours.

As the financial restructuring of HE places students firmly as consumers of education, they in turn are sexual consumers and providers in a contemporary society where 'sex sells'. The links between neo-liberalisation, precarious informal economy work and the student sex worker status need to be considered further as the mainstreaming of sexual consumption and the position of students as consumers results in possible unintended consequences such as the sexualisation of HE.

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Notes

1. For instance, in the United Kingdom (December 2011) see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-16157522>; in the USA see: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/12/14/students-working-prostitutes-fund-studies-nus_n_1147656.html; and in France (October 2011) see: http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-10-25/europe/30319244_1_prostitutes-student-groups-british-students.
2. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9110949/Students-working-in-sex-trade-to-pay-university-fees.html>.
3. See interview with Brooke Magnenti: <http://news.sky.com/home/showbiz-news/article/15470366>. Also see discussion on BBC Radio 4 *Woman's Hour* (25 November 2011). Jennifer Hayashi Danns' book *Stripped* (2011) reports on her lap-dancing career whilst studying at university.
4. See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2074054/So-students-turning-prostitution-Theres-new-oldest-profession.html>.
5. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-16157522>.
6. See <http://www.moneysavingspy.co.uk/news/272235-Student-debt-set-to-treble-over-next-four-years> (accessed 21 July 2011).
7. See <http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/research/projects/regulatory-dance>.
8. Las Vegas has a population of 583,756 (2010) and annual tourist visitors of approximately 37,335,436 (2010), whilst the northern UK city has a population of 80,000.
9. The housemum role, often occurring in larger venues, is usually a female manager who is there specifically to organise and look after the dancers.
10. Reference Follow on Funding.

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