



Department for Education

Thank you for your further email of 22 December about your concerns regarding recent sex worker toolkits being rolled out at universities and specifically what we are doing to counter these toolkits.

I am sure you will understand that the COVID-19 outbreak has resulted in unprecedented levels of correspondence for the department, and I apologise for the delay in replying.

I would like to respond by providing some context around the situation in relation to the toolkits. I will also outline the actions we are taking as a government to address the important issues you have raised.

As previously mentioned, higher education (HE) providers are independent and autonomous institutions. Therefore, they are free to make their own internal decisions, including regarding the content of particular courses and the manner in which they are delivered.

This independence and autonomy also extends to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) - a non-departmental public body funded by a grant-in-aid from the UK government and part of UK Research and Innovation. Although publicly funded, they emphasise the importance of independent and impartial research. This leads them to distribute funds to academics in universities and other institutes throughout the UK for research into economic and social issues.

This independence and autonomy is vital for the healthy functioning of HE providers and the ESRC alike.

Nevertheless, we remain concerned that such toolkits are at risk of enabling, normalising and encouraging sex work and the exploitation of mainly female students. We consider more effective action could be taken to support students in such situations and would urge universities to focus their energy on raising awareness of the dangers of the sex industry and supporting students.

Therefore, although the government does not have any plans to legislate against these toolkits and associated courses, officials in the department have been in contact with one of the leading universities involved, Durham University, to specifically address concerns that the training courses risk promoting and legitimising the sex industry.

I read with interest your suggestion about an alternative pack, focused on aspects such as the potential harms of the sex industry, sources of financial support and help for those wanting to escape the industry. As mentioned in our previous

correspondence, we are clear that financial support is available to students facing hardship and that they should be supported by their institution. It is for this reason that the government put in an extra £85m last year for universities to help students struggling, funds that could be used to support the kind of measures you suggest.

Within the government's strategy for tackling violence against women and girls, it is clearly outlined that our priority in this context is public protection: people involved in prostitution can be particularly vulnerable to sexual and other violent crime and may in fact be victims of child sexual exploitation or modern slavery. Prostitution can be a complex and controversial issue, however, the law and our response to rape and sexual assault is clear and unequivocal and we want to increase protection and access to justice for this often vulnerable group.

I hope this is helpful and once again thank you for contacting the department.