

Student Sex Work at UAlberta

UASU Perks survey, August 31-Sept 2, 2021 (n=1,361)

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Overview

The past two years have destabilized many students' personal and financial circumstances. Simultaneous instability has impacted the nature of sex work. Recent studies suggest that 2-7% of post-secondary students in North America and Western Europe are willing to disclose participation in various kinds of sex work, many of them enthusiastically and others out of need or due to structural inequities.^{1,2} Sex work includes a wide variety of in-person and remote/online services and content.

> In North America and Western Europe, some studies show that 2-7% of post-secondary students participate in sex work.

> UAlberta students' participation in sex work is an equity-related data gap.

We have little information about the extent to which UAlberta students may participate in sex work. These data gaps touch on structural barriers around health, policing, the Code of Student Behaviour, sexual violence prevention and response, food insecurity, social stigma, access to services, and under- or unemployment. Our research is not intended to challenge sex work as a profession.

This UASU survey included questions on sex work and sex education. This report focuses on the questions to do with sex work. It also cross-tabulates by Kinsey rating - a highly simplified scale of sexual orientation from 0 (completely heterosexual) to 6 (completely homosexual). Respondents could also select X (asexual). The Kinsey scale's primary limits are that its focus on sexual orientation does not encompass the breadth of gender-based identity, and that it does not appropriately account for the experiences and needs of transgender students.

Demographics are another major limitation. To keep the survey as accessible and non-invasive as possible given the subject matter, we kept demographic questions minimal. Further research could explore intersections of race and gender in this context.

¹ For example, see Ernst, Felicitas, Nina Romanczuk-Seiferth, Stephan Köhler, Till Amelung, and Felix Betzler. "Students in the Sex Industry: Motivations, Feelings, Risks, and Judgments." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (February 25, 2021): 586235. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.586235>.

² See also Blum, Austin W., Katherine Lust, Gary Christenson, Brian L. Odlaug, Sarah A. Redden, and Jon E. Grant. "Transactional Sexual Activity among University Students: Prevalence and Clinical Correlates." *International Journal of Sexual Health* 30, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 271-80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2018.1491922>.

Sample and Platform

UASU Perks (perks.uasu.ca) is a gamification platform. UAlberta students earn points for activities like checking in at events, participating in a donor-backed vaccination promotion contest, or taking small surveys. Students can redeem points for real-world goods (e.g. branded socks or mugs).

This survey (August 23-September 2, 2021) received 1,361 unique responses, around 1/3 of Perks users active during that time period. Most respondents were undergraduates; around 5% identified as graduate students or recent graduates.

> Convenience sample collected through UASU Perks, a gamified student engagement platform.

> Primarily undergraduate students, distributed across faculties and years of study.

> 1,361 respondents.

Findings

2.1% of respondents had done remote and/or in-person sex work while studying at UAlberta.

- Men: 1.9% (11.1% for Kinsey rating 3 or higher)
- Women: 3.0% (3.4% for Kinsey rating 3 or higher)
- Non-binary or other genders: 9.4%

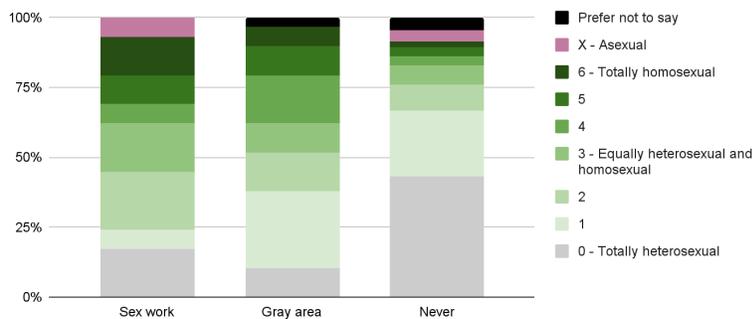
> 2.1% of respondents had done some form of sex work as students.

>> 3% of women.

>> 11% of men with Kinsey rating 3 or higher.

>> 9% of non-binary students.

Queer students are heavily represented among student sex workers and those who are not sure whether they have done sex work



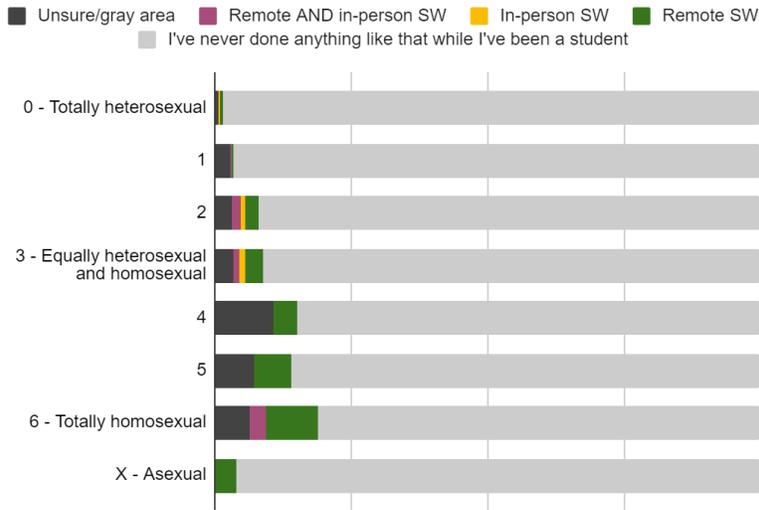
5.5% of respondents preferred not to answer the question.

> 5.5% chose not to answer the question on sex work.

In addition to those who had done sex work, 2.1% of respondents selected "I'm not sure whether I have or not. There's a lot of gray area."

> 2.1% of respondents were not sure whether they had done sex work as students.

- Men: 1.0% (5.6% for Kinsey rating 3 or higher)
- Women: 2.3% (5.4% for Kinsey rating 3 or higher)
- Non-binary or other genders: 9.4%

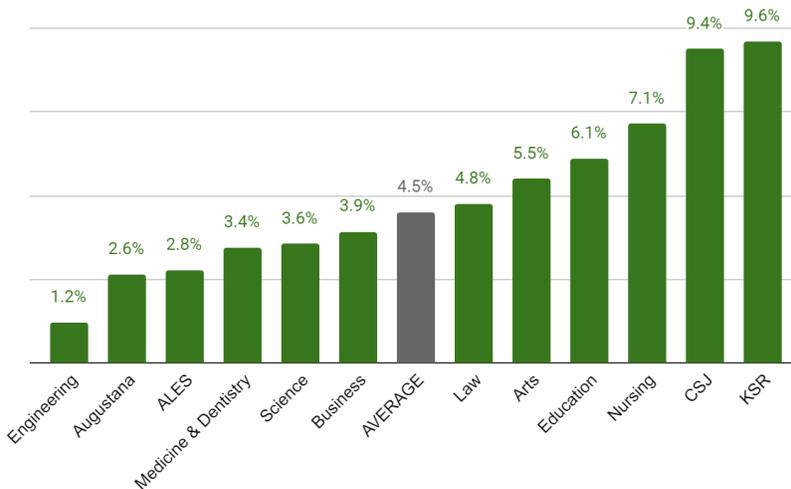


> Queer students far more likely to be in 'gray area' situations.

Sex work participation and 'gray area' respondents appeared to be well-represented across faculties. To preserve privacy, we combined responses on the sex work question into a yes/no variable, where 'no' = 'I've never done anything like that while I've been a student' and 'yes' = remote, in-person, remote + in-person, and gray area respondents.

> Wide variation by faculty.

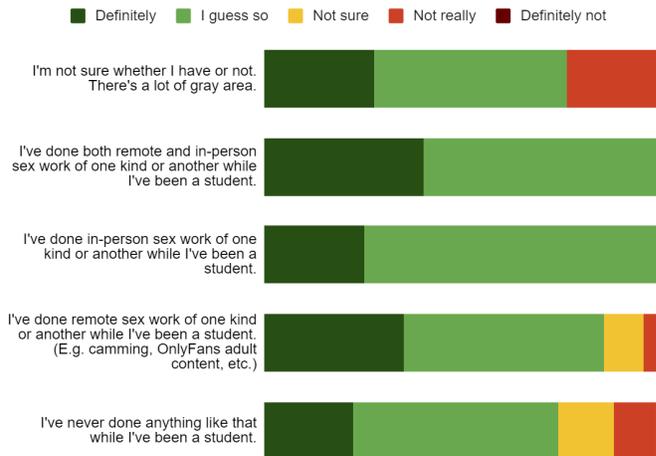
We found significant variation by faculty. However, note that these variations are based on small numbers. For example, out of 182 Arts students, five had done some form of sex work and another five were unsure.



Self-reported sexual health knowledge was higher for students who had done in-person sex work, but lower for those who were not sure whether they had done sex work or not.

> 24% of “gray area” respondents feel like they do not know enough about sexual health.

"Do you feel like you know enough about sexual health?"



Students in marginal, complex, or changing situations may not have access to the resources they need. Queer students are heavily overrepresented among these ‘gray area’ respondents, reinforcing the importance of accessible sexual health education and resources.

Conclusion

Our data suggests that UAlberta students participate in sex work at rates consistent with other studies. Participation in various forms of sex work and in ‘gray area’ situations/activities varies widely by faculty, gender, and sexual orientation. Self-reported knowledge of sexual health is limited, even among many students who have participated in in-person sex work.

Sexual health resources could have an outsize impact on the health and safety of the campus community, as could additional emphasis on sexual violence prevention and clearer, more equitable reporting and investigation pathways. However, these resources must be relevant to and inclusive of queer and trans communities.