

<b>Institution: University of Exeter</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: History</b>
<b>Title of case study: Sex and History</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Sexual health is a key national and local priority, estimated to cost the NHS more than £700 million a year. The research of Professor Kate Fisher into sexual behaviour and personal identity has informed a pioneering approach to improving young people's well-being and sexual health. Working with schools, museums and charities, this methodology, which involves showing young people 'erotic' objects from museum holdings, has had a positive impact on young people's mental and physical wellbeing, personal identity, social skills, personal resilience, confidence, sexual health and life chances. Its success has attracted further investment, and influenced sex education policy discussion. It has also enhanced the role of regional museums in effecting social change and well-being, informed debate on the relationship between the health and cultural sectors, created new economically beneficial partnerships, and shaped museum policy.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Professor Fisher's research undertaken at Exeter University since her appointment in 2000 underpins a new approach to sex education, beyond a focus on methods of preventing pregnancy or STDs. Her research into individual sexual choices, contraceptive practices, attitudes and identities in the 1930s and 1940s (section 3 refs 1 &amp; 2) demonstrated that, in a modern context, sex and relationship education would benefit from a shift away from a focus on the prevention of pregnancy. She found that whether or not contraceptives were used was not primarily predicated on the knowledge of methods or appliances; but rather dependent on more complex aspects of personal identity such as gendered codes of behaviour or notions of respectability. Professor Fisher's prize-winning monographs also demonstrated that a productive dialogue between past and present was central to the development of many people's sexual identities. This finding fuelled her subsequent research which is focused on elucidating the place of the past in the construction of ideas about sex (section 3 ref 5). It has demonstrated the perennial power of past cultures as an authority in shaping, articulating and disseminating this knowledge. In collaboration with Dr Rebecca Langlands (Classics and Ancient History, University of Exeter), Professor Fisher researched the impact of sexually-themed material found at the archaeological sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum, especially the Brothel and the Secret Museum, on visitors' understanding of sex. Two major articles have established the effect of such material on the shaping of sexual identities (section 3 refs 3 &amp; 4).</p> <p>A key and original finding of this interdisciplinary, collaborative research is that material from past cultures can act as a productive and challenging stimulus, through which people can explore, develop and think about sexual questions. The research into tourists at Pompeii and Herculaneum demonstrated the ways such visits were experienced as eye-opening and empowering encounters which expanded people's horizons, opened up new ways of thinking about sex, sexual customs, morality, codes, power and autonomy, and legitimated alternative ways of being. Material culture from past societies, such as ancient Rome, was beneficial in the development of visitors' sexual identities in several ways. It demonstrates cultural and historical diversity, allowing people to reflect on similarities and differences between cultures. It offers thought-provoking evidence about human practices, yet provides historical distance that depersonalises discussion. It can be interpreted in many different ways, empowering people to come up with their own interpretations and test theories against their own preconceptions and it also empowers people with the awareness that people have been talking about, thinking about and depicting sex for millennia, encouraging them to feel it is okay for them to do so too. Visual material, such as pictures and artefacts, is revealed by this research to be a particularly effective medium, providing an immediate and arresting point of engagement with the past. This research also explored the issues at stake in museums displays and the challenges museums face in engaging with their varied audiences (section 3 refs 3 &amp; 4).</p>

## Impact case study (REF3b)

Fisher's research methodology is also important in the approach to impact described below, which draws directly on that adopted by Fisher in her monographs (section 3 refs 1 & 2). This research demonstrated the efficacy of open-ended, unstructured interviews in obtaining high quality, reflective, considered and open discussions about individuals' sexual attitudes and practices; techniques that have been successfully adopted in the Sex and History Project too.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

**Evidence of the quality of the research:** this research was the result of external grant funding and all the publications were peer reviewed, and the main books were listed for prizes.

1. K. Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain 1918-1960* (OUP, 2006). Won several awards including the RHS Whitfield Prize; proxime accessit in the Longman/History Today Award; ALA/CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title; on the basis of it Fisher was shortlisted for Times Higher Young Academic Author of the Year Award 2007. Funded by a Wellcome Trust Project Grant (£49,559).
2. Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution. Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* (CUP, 2010). Longlisted for BBC Samuel Johnson award, funded by an ESRC project grant (R000236621) £107,697.00 and Wellcome Trust Project Grant (059811/2/JM/HH/SW) £49,559.
3. Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands, "This way to the red light district": the internet generation visits the brothel in Pompeii" in Kim Shahabudin and Dunstan Lowe (eds.) *Classics For All* (2009), 172-194. Research funded by Wellcome Trust Strategic Award.
4. Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands 'The Censorship Myth and the Secret Museum' in S. Hales and J. Paul (eds.), *Pompeii in the Popular Imagination from its Rediscovery to Today*, (OUP, 2011).
5. Kate Fisher, British Academy Mid-career fellowship January-June 2012 (£86,190), on 'the uses of the past in late nineteenth and early twentieth century sexual science'.
6. R.Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (CUP, 2006).

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research discussed above underpins the Sex and History Project, directed by Professor Fisher and Dr Langlands (launched in 2009), which reconstructs the kind of productive engagement with the past experienced by tourists in Pompeii and Herculaneum, through a variety of public and school-based interventions, workshops and museum visits all of which use sexually-themed museum objects to facilitate the exploration of contemporary issues around sex, gender and personal identity with positive long-term impacts. Sex and History has involved collaborations between five regional museums, in excess of 30 schools and colleges, sexual health charities, sex education experts, local authority youth services, young people's charities and arts organisations. It has involved museum-based workshops, creative responses (linked in some cases to coursework, including film making, soundscapes, dance, animation), museum-collection visits, intergenerational discussion, exhibition curation, sex education sessions within schools (totalling in excess of 1,000 young participants), games-based sex education workshops and a sex education resource pack (the Talking Sex Pack), developed with Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro, trialled in 20 schools in Cornwall (totalling in excess of 15,000 pupils).

**The development of an improved sex and relationship education service** is a key priority in the South West where rates of sexually transmitted disease infection are increasing, and the teenage pregnancy rate is both higher than the national average in many areas (especially Torbay and Plymouth) and not reducing in line with national targets. Agencies in the South West have highlighted the need for such education to take place not only in formal educational settings, but also within the wider community (youth groups, drop-in centres, museums and libraries) and to include a broad range of issues to do with emotional health and well-being, including self-esteem, communication skills, life skills, understandings of power and consent, positive relationships, and social pressures. Recent Department of Education guidelines highlight the importance of sex education which helps 'children and young people develop confidence in talking, listening and thinking about sex and relationships'. The research of Langlands and Fisher speaks directly to these agenda and through the Sex and History Project is having a direct impact on mental and physical health (with particular relevance to sexual health) in Devon and Cornwall in two distinct

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

ways: directly (through work with young people and their teachers/educators) and indirectly (by making a contribution to policy discussion).

Sex and History pioneers a new approach to sex education; it provides a wider social and cultural framework for the assimilation of biological and practical information about sexual health, and empowers young people to make healthy choices about sex and relationships. Third party evaluation [1] drawing on over 100 interviews, concluded that the project delivered significant social outcomes for the young people involved: 'it empowered participants to talk honestly in a trusting environment (through the projective techniques – discussing in the third person, and exploring historical objects and behaviour in the past, rather than the embarrassment of talking about sex directly); opened up discussion of topics that are particularly difficult to address, concerning issues such as consent, pornography and power within relationships; provided young people with an awareness of historical difference that encouraged them to challenge contemporary attitudes or resist peer pressure; fostered greater understanding of cultural difference; encouraged social and familial ties (many reported that they were able to have discussions with their peers and in particular their parents, often for the first time); encouraged healthy lifestyles and contributed to mental and physical well-being (some projects had a noticeable impact on participants' body image and self-esteem) [1, 3, 7]. A participant from Exeter's state tertiary education college stated: "We found it inspirational...The historical objects opened our minds to new ideas. It made us more mature in the way we thought about sex. We all discovered things about ourselves." A team leader from Plymouth Youth Service commented: "In every young person in our group we can see how this project has developed and moved them to a different place."

The use of the Sex and History methodology in projects with vulnerable young people was particularly profound. A long-term evaluation report [3] which traced the lives of 35 participants referred by Plymouth Children's services over a 3 year period, concluded that the Sex and History methodology had enriched their lives, ameliorated some of the effects of structural disadvantages and provided a sustained transformation in future opportunities and personal well-being. One, who was in trouble for shoplifting, was deemed by a magistrate to have successfully turned his life around, as a result of his involvement in Sex and History, and subsequently obtained work as a child-care apprentice. While another participant was inspired to enrol in a media course and secured employment as a producer with an arts company. S/he stated: "It gave me direction; it showed me what I was capable of. It changed me to the person I am now. It was a major turning point in my life."

A report on the trial of a sex education resource pack [2] found it to be attractive and useful, and this initiative is now informing policy debate. A teacher at Exeter's Academy of Music and Sound commented: "We have to deliver certain SRE targets in college and we use college tutorials ... [but] it's hard. This provided a new way of meeting these requirements. The objects are surprising... They facilitate discussion, they make it okay to talk about sex...We've never found a better way to do it. It was a revelation." Fisher and Langlands are now developing the methodology and methods of delivery in collaboration with regional co-ordinators of PHSE and SRE in Bristol, Cornwall and Devon, with the newly-formed national RSE Hub; and have recently been invited to showcase their work at the national Sex Education Forum.

**Developing museums' work with young people**

In all its many manifestations (object-based workshops in schools and colleges in Devon and Cornwall, museum/archival visits, exhibition curation and creative object-response projects [1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]), the Sex and History Project has brought young people into close collaboration with five regional museums (Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Plymouth City Museum, RCM Truro, RAMM Exeter, Russell Coates Museum Bournemouth) their collections, and the Wellcome Trust collection in London. A third party report concluded that the use of the Sex and History methodology in museum settings transformed relationships between museums and teenagers and young adults (already identified as an important but hard to reach audience). Young people reported a change in their attitudes towards what museums can offer, a new appreciation of the value of historic objects and their relevance to their own lives, and some are now working towards future careers in the cultural sector [3, 10]. Museums reported a change in the ways in which they

## Impact case study (REF3b)

use their collections, a rethinking of their archiving and cataloguing practices, and new learning about their objects from the research. Museums found the methodology a refreshing and effective way of working with young people, engaging them on a deep level, e.g. through co-curation, which produced impressive creative outputs that enhanced the museums' displays and reached new audiences [1]. At RCM Truro the methodology informed a reshaping of the ways in which the museum staff work with their collections. Staff were retrained and a report published by RCM Truro has been promoted nationally by the Collections Trust as an example of best practice within the nationwide Revisiting Collections' agenda [10].

**Developing regional partnerships**

Through the Sex and History Project, Exeter University, young people's charities, sexual health agencies, arts organisations and museums have developed new, mutually beneficial long-term connections and partnerships. The Sex and History Project has received positive media attention, it won an award for Outstanding Social and Cultural Impact at the Exeter University Impact Awards (2011) and was put forward for an EngageU award for European innovation in university public engagement. Since 2009 Sex and History's innovative methodology has been widely recognised as an effective and adaptable model, and has attracted a wide range of partners who seek to make use of it. The third party report also highlighted the economic benefits to partner organisations of working with the Sex and History methodology: *Fictional Projects* is using the methodology to construct a marketable games-based resource, youth facilitators have used to project to develop consultancy work, and the dynamics arts company *Effervescent* attributed the increase of its turnover by 320% between 2010-11 and 2012-13, increased regional visibility and its showcasing by the Arts Council to its work on the Sex and History Project.[1] The methodology is currently being developed with leading children's charity Barnardos as a way of working with very vulnerable young people. The Arts Council has showcased the project as a model for using the arts to enhance health and well-being. It was presented at a workshop on Strategic Commissioning for the Arts, Health and Wellbeing, and delivered as a keynote demonstration of best practice at symposium of regional experts in Health, Wellbeing and the Arts: 'Next Steps in Commissioning Arts and Health', and showcased at the Devon Museums Forum 2013.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Third party evaluation of all the activities under the Sex and History project umbrella (including *Lust in Translation*, *Revealing Collections*, *Bourne Fairies*, *Stripped*, *Conversation Pieces*, the *Talking Sex* pack), undertaken by Hope Stone Research on the basis of over 100 interviews.
2. Report on the trial of the *Talking Sex* pack in schools in Cornwall, (developed with Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro and head of PSHE Cornwall).
3. Impact Review <http://tinyurl.com/phhq438> by *Effervescent: Social Alchemy* of short and longer term impact of Plymouth City Museum's Sex and History Project, *Lust in Translation*.
4. The *Sex and History* blog <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/sexandhistory/> containing direct feedback from participants in the project as well as links to further websites showcasing material and feedback from the project.
5. Evaluative report <http://conversation-pieces.net/?p=79> by *Fictional Projects* of *Playing with Objects: Conversation Pieces*, a REACT-funded collaboration with games designers.
6. Commissioned evaluative report of REACT-funded *Playing with Objects* play tests and facilitator-led sessions with Exeter College.
7. Case report on the Russell Coates Museum, Bournemouth's Sex and History Project, the '*Bourne Fairies*' project and the related *Stripped* exhibition.
8. Evaluation Reports commissioned by the RAMM of the *Revealing Collections* Creative Workshops (2011), with Exeter College, Academy of Music and Sound and Exeter Foyer.
9. *Lust in Translation* Website <http://eff.org.uk/lit/> showcasing the outcomes and feedback from Plymouth City Museum and *Effervescent: Social Alchemy's* Sex and History project, '*Lust in Translation*' a 2011 project with vulnerable youth and elderly.
10. "Revisiting Collections" case-study promoted by national charity the Collections Trust on the 2010 RCM Truro's Sex and History Project: *Revealing Collections* [Read the project case study here](#).