

Period Poverty Report

What is it & What do we do about it?

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1.Introduction

This report will focus on period poverty amongst students whilst looking at how the University and Students' Union approach these challenges.

It will also look at options around sustainability ensuring that we contribute to the environmental challenges our planet faces today.

In October/November 2017 students at our BetterStaffs forum voted for the Union to remove the Tampon Tax from our shops. The Union listened and whilst not able to remove the tax were able to provide products at cost price.

In carrying out the research links have been identified on how the Mental Health & Wellbeing and love life of women can be affected, this can be directly linked to the ability of women to excel and succeed.

Additionally, across many educational institutions a stigma remains around period poverty and this needs to be addressed.

There also needs to be aspects of intersectionality in this work, there needs to be a clear plan for all students irrespective of how they identify with themselves, either on the basis of background, ethnicity or religion. This needs to be imbedded into our belonging work and make sure that we can support our students throughout their time with us.

It also provides an opportunity to lobby government to encourage them come up with an inclusive plan to end the stigma and combat (and end) period poverty. We need for them to commit to a scheme of free sanitary products for ALL women, supported by a compulsory Menstruation Education policy in primary and secondary schools, we need to start educating those young girls who will be going through adolescence.

As a University and Union there needs to be a commitment in helping students grow and not necessarily just through academic support, we need to inform and highlight those aspects of society that can be changed or improved for the better.

With this work we can show students that we can improve their experience at University even with the smaller things such as putting an end to period poverty. Currently there is no real definitive research conducted for Universities so we should ensure the work that is carried out in HE is demonstrable in evidencing to government that Period Poverty is a big issue for us too.

2. Research

It is clear from the research that Schools are using different approaches to tackling Period Poverty, these include; the Red Box project and #FreePeriods headed by Amika George.

In their lifetime a woman will (with no choice) go through approximately 500 menstrual cycles yet there are no Government schemes or NHS funding available to supply women with free sanitary products in England. In 2018 the Scottish devolved government announced a £5.2m scheme to provide free sanitary products to all schools, colleges and universities, on the back of this the UK Treasury said the Department for Education would now develop a similar scheme for England, to date nothing has been done.

The report references 3 surveys:

Plan International UK from 2017
Ginger Comms Survey with Bloody Big Brunch
Always Survey in 2018 (source The Independent)

All surveys were conducted on girls and women in the UK with the GingerComms survey also including Men in their research.

In this research there was regular reference to the 'Toxic Trio', which is an incredibly important element of this work. This ideology is based on the research conducted by Plan International and are the key themes of Period poverty.

The Toxic Trio:

1. **The cost of sanitary products** – girls and women in the UK are struggling to cover the cost of their periods, resorting to cheaper or makeshift options to make it through.
2. **A lack of education about periods** – Girls are not being taught how their bodies work. As a result, few are aware what a healthy and unhealthy period are like, and very few of the young people that Plan International UK spoke to could name more than the top two (disposable) sanitary product options.
3. **Shame, Stigma & taboo** – Girls are being told there is something wrong with their bodies when they have their period. This normal, healthy process is being treated like it is something to be ashamed of.

Cost:

In 2017 the Plan International Survey UK stated that Period Poverty could affect 1 in 10 girls in the UK (of 1000 woman and girls survey), whereas the GingerComms survey conducted in late 2018/early 2019 suggests that this has now increased, out of 931 women and girls, 27% of those have at times been unable to afford sanitary products. The results of these surveys paint a disturbing picture, in the 2 years between surveys Period Poverty has gotten significantly worse, with 68% of women having to use makeshift sanitary products compared to 42% a year earlier.

Lee Beattie of Big Bloody Brunch said:

"As a society we need to send out the message that menstruation isn't dirty, and it certainly isn't a luxury."

This is in reference to the luxury tax that currently still is being applied on all sanitary items and period products in the UK. Several businesses have already taken the lead and decided to remove this tax directly from the customer. Tesco were the first major retailer to take this decision, followed by Waitrose, other retailers such as Co-op and Sainsburys closely followed suit.

Michelle McEttrick, Tesco's Group brand director said,

"For many of our customers, tampons, panty liners and sanitary towels are essential products."

Tesco's currently offer some of the cheapest items on the market.

In 2015, 320,000 people signed a petition to scrap the Tampon Tax. Labour MP Paula Sherriff tabled an amendment in Parliament to end the Tampon Tax once and for all and in March 2016 this was passed by the UK Government. Prime Minister David Cameron petitioned European ministers in Brussels to change the rules regarding the tax, saying that Britain would be able to a zero rate tax for all sanitary products finally putting to and of the Tampon Tax. The Chancellor, George Osborne appeared to contradict this when he said the rules of the European Union did not allow us to arbitrarily remove the tax but said that once the UK had left following Brexit that this tax could be removed, this was echoed by the Equalities Minister, Victoria Atkins.

It was not all negative however, in 2018 Tracey Crouch, the Minister for Sport & Civil Society announced a £15M Tampon Tax Fund, which would focus on tackling Period Poverty with monies also being used to support vulnerable women and young girls who have suffered domestic abuse and rape.

The following research is based on the financial impact for Students at Staffordshire;

Of the 11,162 students on Stoke campus, just over 4,800 have identified themselves as female. The menopause is considered to take effect between 45 and 55 years of age. Taking the lower of these 2 ages the financial cost has been calculated for 4,410 women (these being under 45 and on Stoke Campus)

Product / Cost

Boots

Lil-Lets	(14 pack ultra wings)	£1.55
BodyForm	(All Variations)	£1.65
Always	(All Variations)	£1.99

It has been assumed that each student will have 12 cycles a year and on average use one pack of products per cycle

Price of Product x 12 Months x No. of Eligible students

	Lil-Lets	BodyForm	Always
Price	£1.55	£1.65	£1.99
Months	12	12	12
Students	4410	4410	4410
Per Student Cost	£18.60	£19.80	£23.88
Total Student Cost	£82,026	£87,318	£105,311
3yr Course Cost	£246,078	£261,954	£315,933

Tescos

Tesco's don't stock lil-lets so I used their own brand for comparison

Tesco Free Spirit	(all pack sizes)	£0.66
Bodyform	(all variations)	£1.42
Always	(all variations)	£1.40

The exact same criteria / calculation as above has been assumed.

	FreeSpirit	BodyForm	Always
Price	£0.66	£1.42	£1.40
Months	12	12	12
Students	4410	4410	4410
Per Student Cost	£7.92	£17.04	£16.80
Total Student Cost	£34,927	£75,146	£74,088
3yr Course Cost	£104,781	£225,439	£222,264

Sustainable option

One of the more sustainable options is the Mooncup. On average these are sold at £21.99 and are generally replaced every few years so the cost calculation is slightly different;

Price of product x Students

£21.99 x 4410 students = **£96,976**

These calculations are based on averages are prices are correct as of January 2019.

The cost to our students is one that cannot be ignored, these could be potential cost savings should it be possible to negotiate directly with the manufacturer.

Education:

The research identified a number of links between how Period Poverty has a direct effect on engagement. In 2017, it was estimated that as many as 49% of girls have missed an entire day of education because of their period, 59% of these were not able to give an honest answer as to why they were absent, choosing to make up an alternate excuse. 64% have missed a PE or Sports based lesson and again 52% gave a different reason for absence.

In the survey conducted by Always they said that those girls and women who struggled to afford sanitary products are less likely to have completed their GCSE's or go on to sit A-levels. Additionally, Plan International indicated 68% said they felt less able to pay attention in class while menstruating. Out of 1000 women surveyed by Always, nearly two thirds admitted they lack confidence due to bullies at school, which leads into the link of how period poverty can affect one's mental health, which is evidenced by 39% of those now suffering from anxiety and/or depression.

Sexual Education has been on our national curriculum since 2017, however there is a vital component of that education missing; Menstrual Education. This is extremely important for both girls and boys, boys particularly need educating to make them aware that it is natural and that girls should not be treated any differently because of periods.

Alarming, the GingerComms survey said that 90% of girls would not let their teacher know if they are on their period, and that 40% would play more sport if they felt comfortable talking about menstruation.

Probably equally shocking is that 1 in 7 admitted they did not know what was happening when they started their period with 26% not knowing what to do, with a 33% reporting that they had to self-educate themselves.

More recently, a young woman called Alice Smith has been campaigning for menstrual health to be included in the national curriculum, partly to raise awareness for endometriosis. It's planned to be taught in schools by 2020. This will see all pupils being taught menstrual health and the menstrual cycle starting as early as primary school. Sex education has been compulsory in England since 2017, but there has been a public consultation about what should be on the curriculum. The problem is that a study done by the Eve Appeal reports that 76% of young people have said that they found the menstrual education they received to be awkward and embarrassing and 60% said they thought the education was old-fashioned and unrelatable. This should be a clear indication to the Department for Education, that their current offer in the national curriculum isn't educating or engaging young people.

Stigma:

From an early age, girls tend to be conditioned into thinking that periods are dirty and should be kept a secret. Plan International UK made some interesting finds regarding the stigma of Periods.

Lucy Russell, UK Campaign manager at Plan International UK had this to say about period poverty:

"But what is also clear is that it is a problem of stigma as well as affordability. Girls feel embarrassed by their periods, and that can't be right."

Half the girls from their survey said they are embarrassed by their period and felt uncomfortable talking about them generally. This could be linked to a number of issues, one being the lack of education during school which leads to bullying, predominately by boys who are unable to relate to having periods. 71% of girls admitted they have felt embarrassed buying sanitary products. 50% of men said that they would never buy period products for their partners and strangest of all was the fact that 50% would describe periods as unpleasant or disgusting.

Despite all these statistics, there is some positive information coming out of this. 85% of people surveyed by GingerComms would like to see a positive shift in attitude about periods and the same amount think that period products should be available for free in schools and colleges. 89% think that the distribution of period products is as or more important than the distribution of condoms. 65% think that period products should be available for free for all women and girls, regardless of the income, interestingly 55% of men thought that and 68% of women agreed. 52% of men and 69% of women would like to see TV and advertising give a more accurate representation of what it is like to have periods.

The message needs to be that periods are not something to hide away from or be ashamed of, but the stigma surrounding periods has been shown to directly affect a girl's potential to succeed.

3. Hurdles & Issues

Mature/Parent Students:

There will be some parent/carer students who might need to access these products for their children/dependents at home, this is something we should not discriminate against but embrace and actively support. As a society we should not be expecting children to buy these taxed products themselves, and it's even more difficult when these children come from low income households. We also need to be aware that based on the data of students that mature students will more than likely use this service as well. The idea is to make these products free for every student who has periods, and therefore need to make sure that there is #NoExcuse for Age Discrimination either.

We also need to think about the well-being of parents and carers who are missing meals or not using proper sanitary items in order that they can provide for their children/dependents. Periods are not a choice, so why are sanitary items?

LGBT+ & Non-Binary:

We need to take into consideration the circumstances of trans and non-binary students. There are students who are trying to transition but are not currently on HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) or other medication to block hormones. For a transgender Man this can be a highly emotional experience, having to endure a period in the physical appearance as a male. For them, this is a very distressing time of the month as their body is doing something that they don't necessarily associate with. The process of buying the products (not just because of the cost) is additionally complex, if they are presenting/transitioning as male and buying sanitary products they feel like their presentation is broken/faded, and people will see that they are

trans or of the opposite gender of what they are showing, or invalidating their preference of non-binary. It genders them as something they do not associate with.

I have spoken to our LGBT+ Network about the issue of period poverty and how the University and Union could be inclusive. I know this issue of periods for a trans or non-binary person can be quite distressing but I wanted to make sure they were included in this work. In regards to a help yourself system, they wanted a supply for the gender-neutral toilets. Now there are some issues with this, if the items are in a central space of the gender-neutral toilets, anyone in there can see people taking from the box, which is a safeguarding problem and may cause unwanted comments from other people using the toilets at that time.

Misrepresentation of periods through media:

In recent years when people have been actively trying to tackle Period Poverty, Labour MP Danielle Rowley told the House of Commons;

“We know that the average cost of a period in the UK every year is £500”.

The survey carried out by VoucherCodesPro.co.uk in 2015 said the average woman spent £40 a month on a period. This raised a few eyebrows which lead to further research. It was claimed that the “average woman” spent £13 on sanitary items, £8 on new underwear, £4.50 on pain relief. This number also considered, snacking at £8.50 and £7 on items including magazines, toiletries and DVD’s.

4. What are people doing at other unions?

There are a few unions across England that have period poverty campaigns, we spoke to a few officers from Scottish Students’ Unions to see what they were achieving and what they had learnt by running these campaigns even though they are government funded.

We spoke with Ele Fisher, Welfare Officer at Keele Student’s Union about what they have done for period poverty. Keele have been running a Free Periods Campaign for some time, the focus is to make people more aware of its presence and availability. Their pads were donated to them, sponsored by Bodyform, they also provide their own tampons (by Lil-Lets), they also use Natracare pads and tampons which are environmentally friendly alternatives. They provide packs with roughly a cycles worth of sanitary items in. They used to have baskets in their toilets but they found that people were stealing the baskets and everything in them. We have trialled a similar approach in our female toilets in Ember and found that students were using the product, sometimes it needed topping up every other day, but other times it didn’t need topping up for a few days. We also found that students were donating their own items for the box within our toilets.

Whilst at National Conference in Glasgow we got to visit Strathclyde Student’s Union. They also run a help yourself system in their toilets, however this is a government funded campaign. During the time we visited their venue it was shut for Easter so the toilets were fully stocked with items. They had 3 different containers/baskets, each stocked with different kinds of

Tampons, and towels. When we questioned several students whilst there about the programme there was a lot of positive feedback.

A member of our Marketing Team provided information of a clear Perspex donation box that Cardiff Students' Union have been using for their Periods in Poverty Campaign, which is run by their students as a volunteer project. These products are designated for homeless people rather than students but their donation points seem to be very popular. They also hold fundraising events to raise awareness of what they do, with one of those events being a charity gig.

5. Proposals

There are many different approaches we can take with this work, including things that are "easy" but expensive, utilising services we already have, or to create a service that hasn't been done before.

Help Yourself:

This is a campaign that most Students' Unions run, they leave a supply in their toilets in their venues. We could also extend this to the library and other toilets in all buildings accessed by students. The library would be a great way to reach our students as they tend to spend a lot of time in there for research and assignments.

There is also the possibility of having a supply in Halls, for example flats that will have female students in (I understand this may be challenging to support trans and non-binary students).

There is a tactful and respectful way of increasing campaign awareness, we could utilise our enrolment process to ascertain if students would like to opt into the campaign and not necessarily wait and alert them on "move in" day, when they are likely to be accompanied by parents and where other students will be present.

We were also worried about the behaviour from other students in our gender-neutral toilets if we were to have the items in a central area of the toilets. It was suggestion that we have a small bag in each cubicle hanging from the hook with a smaller number of items in, for example, 3 tampons and 3 towels. Keeping them topped up would be built into toilet checks by staff within the venue. This would make it a little more discreet for those who need to use it. There is the worry that we may have the same problem as Keele with people taking the bag with everything in it.

Heavily Discounted Items:

Another suggestion is that we drastically reduce the price of the items in the shop. Currently the Union shops sell these products at cost so any further reduction in price would reduce the amount of contribution to the Union, this would reduce our ability to deliver of all the other support services that are provided to students. Unfortunately, even at cost the Union shops are not competitive when compared to other retailers, currently branded products are the most popular in the shops, anything that can be done to lower the cost would see students be far more engaged, whether that be a price reduction or variety of products, with non-branded products being available.

Vouchers provided by the Doctor:

This is a great opportunity for us to be able to engage students with the on-campus Doctor, whilst at the same time providing some education on menstrual health. It will allow students an opportunity to understand their own cycles and anatomy much better. Students would be

asked what their cycles are like and how often, it would also allow them to get the best contraception, and if they suffer badly with their cycle they could be given advice on how to reduce them to a smaller amount a year. In creating a better understanding it will allow students to spot changes more easily and seek advice, this could lead to early identification/prevention of such things as Cervical Cancer and Endometriosis.

The idea would be that students would explain their cycle to a doctor and what kind of product they would prefer, the doctor would then tell them what product would be best suited for them (Absorption level) and how many they would realistically need on a voucher. The student would bring that voucher to the shop or to Students' Union reception where they would receive their sanitary items in a discreet bag. The only issue identified would be the availability of the Doctor, there needs to be a consistent and reliable service and if students consider that is not the case then this could fail.

Red Box Project:

This initiative is mainly in schools, basically it is a big red storage box filled with period products usually located at the school reception or in the nurse/first aid room. A student would say they needed the big red box to their teacher and they would be sent to one of those locations to get what they needed. This provision would cater for those students who need an item at a specific time rather than for their full cycle. We could have a Big Red Box at important locations, such as, Student Hub, Coalport Office, Students' Union and the Library.

We could also allow for it to have a supply for an entire cycle should the student require that.

How to get Stock

There are several avenues we can investigate to obtain stock, all have their own merits. It was suggested during our focus groups that we use all three methods if we need to! We thought it would be a fantastic idea to have the donation boxes (like Cardiff SU) on both sides of campus to allow anyone to donate. If students donated a single product we could put this into small help yourself systems in venues, however if entire packs of products were donated we can use those for the voucher system and the red box system.

Donations by students:

This method is really good way to educate and change student's reactions to periods and what they believe it to be. Following some consultation with a small number of student staff we decided to offer free entry to our Flashback event on 24th May to anyone who donated a pack of Sanitary towels or Tampons. With the cost of the product being less than the cost of entry we hope that this initiative will prove successful whilst at the same time encouraging men to buy products for the first time, alleviating some of the stigma that is associated with purchase.

With several donation points this allows students (or staff) to donate discreetly. This has the support of staff and they said they would be more than happy to donate to this Game Changer.

A similar initiative (with plastic bottle tops in Green Week) worked well.

Donations by Charities:

At the Union we already work with Period Power Stoke as they provide period products for the FoodHub. It would be fantastic to work with them on a bigger scale, but the demand may be too much for them to support us 100%.

Buying our own stock:

There is also an opportunity for us to buy our own products but having calculated the total cost it is not something the Union could support independently. There may be options from time to time to top-up stock, it cannot however be the main source of how stock levels are maintained.

6. Impacts if we succeed

The impacts of getting this right can be amazing. Following on from the research if we can break down the stigma of periods, we will see more students consistently engaging in their studies, it will increase the engagement within the student community, it will also encourage students to engage with the Union and the University who will have been seen to have pioneered this initiative.

We are an inclusive University and Union and what better way to demonstrate this, we are thinking about all our students with regards to period poverty and how we can help them.

It provides for education on what is happening with their bodies, and what a healthy/unhealthy period is, and all the associated health benefits of that education

We can begin to breakdown the stigma of periods, change the stereotypical thinking and being to breakdown those cultures that still exist, and in doing so make future generations more comfortable with this naturally occurring event.

It allows us to educate our students on what is going on at a national level and how we can challenge policy

Financially we could be saving students money on something that is outside of their control and if we play our part in shaping national policy that saving would be significant during a lifetime.

Finally consider the message to prospective students, how many more students may decide on Staffordshire having seen how inclusive and supportive we are. They will recognise our commitment to Campaigns and Game Changers, this is our chance to show we are different and can provide a great inclusive experience and make us all Proud to be Staffs !