



Period Poverty in Universities and Colleges

UK and Ireland



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What is the issue?

Period Poverty is a global issue that can affect anyone with a menstrual cycle. It means they do not have access to or have limited access to safe, hygienic sanitary products. They may also be unable to manage their periods with dignity due to community stigma and sanction.

Worldwide, 1.2 billion women lack access to basic sanitation – including sanitary items needed to manage their period. But, this is not only a problem in the developing world, period poverty is very much present in the developed world too. In the UK, it is estimated that around a quarter of women struggle with period poverty. Period poverty is caused by a lack of available information, poor sanitary infrastructure and unaffordable sanitary products, factors which combine to form a uniquely female healthcare crisis that negatively affects the life opportunities of women and girls everywhere.

What does this mean for education?

In 2018, Plan International UK research found that period poverty affects 1 in 10 schoolgirls across the UK. Over 137,700 children in the UK have missed school because of period poverty and 68% said they felt less able to pay attention in class at school or college while menstruating. These girls risk falling 145 education days behind male counterparts. More than 1 in 3 girls (40%) in the UK have used toilet roll because they couldn't afford menstrual products.

What does this mean for universities and colleges?

It means that some of your students definitely live in Period Poverty. As a result, they will miss out on learning, either by missing a lesson or lecture completely, or by not being able to concentrate.

They regularly risk their health by having to use makeshift sanitary towels, or using sanitary items for longer than they should. This has huge ramifications – it leads to gender inequality when male students do not have this burden, and it affects their wellbeing when they are stressed and anxious about whether their makeshift sanitary item will hold.

Should you supply free sanitary products?

Periods are not a choice, yet sanitary products are treated like a luxury. So the answer to this question is an easy one; yes. Schools and Colleges in England, Scotland and Wales can already access free funding for this from their respective Governments, and Scottish universities can as well. So we are asking universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to set up a scheme themselves and bridge the gap.

We will continue to lobby the government for funding – but in the meantime, we urge you to address this issue on your campuses.

CASE STUDIES



University
of Worcester

Worcester Students' Union provide free sanitary products to students, and staff have also started a sanitary scheme.

Elly Lengthorn, Senior Lecturer - Teacher Education, outlines some of the initiatives they undertake in the School of Education department:

"I organise a regular collection from staff in the School of Education to ensure that we have free sanitary products in our School of Education toilets, which I re-stock on a bi/weekly basis. My colleagues have been generous in their donations for the last 8 months and I hope they will continue to be.

"I also ran a 'Menstruation Station' at our PGCE Secondary educators PSHE Fayre this year. Connecting attending teacher trainees and in-service PSHE coordinators with the menstruation content of the new RSE curriculum, with a wide range of reusable menstrual products (displayed around a uterus model kindly loaned by the clinical skills team) and highlighted an International period poverty project in The Gambia."



Joanna Ann, Vice President Welfare and Equal Opportunities Officer at Students' Union at Bournemouth University said:

"I started the Period Poverty campaign October last year in order to raise awareness about Period poverty on campus, known as the 'Comfort & Care' campaign. I have also promoted ways to have a sustainable period. In starting the campaign, I received donations from the RedBox who fortunately have helped in lobbying the Government for free sanitary products in primary and secondary schools, but unfortunately this meant that we had to source elsewhere for donations. Thus, as part of Women's History Month, I am running another campaign to raise awareness and ask students and staff members to donate."



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST

Tara Woodside, a student from the School of Archaeology came across a figure last year which shocked her: one conventional menstrual pad contains the equivalent of four carrier bags worth of plastic.

She decided to do something about this and applied to the Green Fund, where she received £1500 to implement her 'Plastic Free Sanitary Products for QUB' project. This allowed her to purchase 100% biodegradable, vegan and cruelty-free sanitary products from TOTM.

Tara was able to order 20 cases, which worked out at 5,760 sanitary towels. The project was launched with a social media campaign via Queen's website and Twitter, to ensure Queen's community was aware of the project, and the corresponding environmental and wellbeing benefits. This included minimising the amount of plastic entering the environment, informing staff and students about the health impacts of using products containing plastics, tackling period poverty and the menstrual stigma within QUB.

Tara has since provided free sanitary towels in several locations across Queen's, including the Graduate School and McClay Library.



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Katie McGuire, Deputy Director of Sustainability Services, said:

"Currently we provide free sanitary products in a vending machine in our Union and at a number of sites across the Leeds University campus.

We are in the process of looking into providing a non-vending solution (so people can get a full month's supply rather than just one or two when caught short) in addition to more sustainable options. We are also looking to partner with Leeds City Council on a city-wide scheme for provision of free products, with the university being a city hub for free access. This is still in discussion but we are hoping to launch this year."



Natasha Wilkinson, Physical Resources Assistant, said:

“ We started the red box project at Shipley College in 2019. We ordered a box of sanitary products for each building - 5 in total. We then organised staff to look after the red box in their building to make sure there were always enough products available to students.

However, to access these products, as I understand that some students may feel more comfortable asking certain staff members they know. We placed posters around the college, sent out all student emails and uploaded any documents onto our sustainability website. Student services also got involved with the campaign against period poverty!

Despite being one of the smallest colleges in the UK, we felt we had to do something to help female students access their full education. We are located in one of the poorest cities in the UK, so any little thing we can do to help would benefit.

Due to the new government scheme and free sanitary products budget we have been able to stock up on a great variety of products, including a range of sustainable products - which is a great touch and will be advertised to students! We have had students explain that they would have had to have gone home and missed college.”

Q&A

Tackling 'Period Poverty': Providing free sanitary products in universities and colleges

Q1. Is my institution eligible for funding for sanitary items?

This depends on a few things. If you are a university, college or school in Scotland – you are eligible for funding and should already be involved in the free sanitary product scheme. Schools will receive funding through their local authority and colleges and universities will receive it directly from their government.

All institutions in Scotland are signed up to this scheme. If you are a school or college in Wales, you will also receive funding through your local authority for free sanitary items. As of 20th January 2020, schools and colleges in England can access money to provide free sanitary products – this must be applied for as it is not automatically given.

In England, this support does not extend in colleges to learners on higher education qualifications or apprenticeships – though presumably access to this will be at the discretion of colleges. In Northern Ireland and Ireland, there are currently no government funded initiatives, but there are some initiatives being funded by local authorities or social enterprises – like the Red Box Project.

Q2. My institution is not eligible for funding, will it cost a lot to provide support ourselves?

We find the answer to this varies – but ultimately, lack of funding should not put you off setting up initiatives like this because it is feasible to run an initiative on donated products alone if need be.

With the tampon tax being abolished, this means from 2021 there will be a reduction of 5% VAT from sanitary products in the UK. This should help a little with funding. If this is a social enterprise in a university, it might be that the Students' Union can fundraise to provide these products or there might be some funding available within a health and wellbeing budget. The best thing to do is get everyone around the table and look at the options available.

We will outline some of the different ways colleges and universities have provided free sanitary products already below.

Q3. Will students ransack the stands of free sanitary products and leave it empty and messy quickly?

It is possible this may occur if products are made easily accessible (which is advised) – but for the most part, universities and colleges taking part have found that students are respectful of the products.

A survey by Young Scot, commissioned by the Scottish Government, asked 3,602 pupils and students about their experiences of free sanitary products in schools, colleges and universities. The responses were incredibly positive, but there were some barriers that prevented accessibility of sanitary products. Just under half (47.7%) reported a barrier in accessing the free products, and of those that reported a barrier, only 5% said this was because products had been taken advantage of or wasted.

Bigger issues were: lack of availability, not being an easy process to access them, embarrassment or stigma and issues with products offered. So worrying about students and pupils taking advantage of the products is for the most part unwarranted.

Q4. Will students that can afford sanitary products take advantage and use the free products rather than buying them?

This is not a straightforward question. While the free products are primarily aimed at those in period poverty that cannot afford sanitary items, it is also aimed at improving gender equality, and this means supporting those that need sanitary products unexpectedly and do not have them with them.

If students need to go and get the sanitary products from a shop or home, this affects their attendance, or forces them to use sub-par products. So it is important sanitary products are available for all students. The Young Scot survey (outlined in the answer above) stated that in fact the primary reason pupils and students access these products is because they didn't have products with them when needed (91.9%), while 1 in 8 respondents reported that they accessed products because their family didn't have enough money to buy sanitary products (12.6%). However, it does not appear that those who can afford sanitary products access the free products regularly.

Most respondents stated that they accessed free products 'Rarely' (46.2%) or 'Sometimes' (41.9%) from their school, college or university. A minority of respondents stated that they accessed products 'Often' (11.9%). The most commonly selected reason why these respondents didn't access products was 'I didn't need to because I/my family purchased sanitary products' (61.9%).

Q5. Should we make it so that students have to ask for products? How do we go about providing free products?

There are some good examples here where institutions have implemented initiatives that do require students to ask for products, but the general guidance is that this creates an unnecessary barrier that will put many off. So no, students should not need to ask for products.

There is some really great guidance from social enterprise [Hey Girls](#) on why it is important not to have barriers in accessibility of sanitary products and how to distribute them. The key is to make sure distribution plans are student-led and that products are freely available in a discreet way.

The most ideal place, therefore, is most commonly available in toilets. Somebody should be appointed to monitor levels and restock when necessary. This could be part of the cleaners' routine, or a voluntary student/staff initiative.

Q6. Will it have much of a positive impact on students? How will we measure this?

In the survey mentioned in the answers above, by Young Scot, looking at the experiences of Scottish students and pupils accessing free sanitary products, 83.9% of respondents said availability of free products had a positive impact on them.

Of these respondents, most stated that they were 'Less worried about having [their] period' (88.7%) and that they were 'More able to continue with day to day activities during [their] period' (64.1%). A quarter stated that the availability of products improved [their] mental health and wellbeing (24.7%).

So it seems clear that making products available freely will positively benefit students. We understand that universities and colleges are required to show the impact of initiatives such as this. We would suggest a survey might be useful to capture this information.

Q8. What else can we do to fight Period Poverty?

Period Poverty in the UK and Ireland is often overlooked because in comparison to period poverty in developing countries, numbers suffering are significantly lower. However, no level of period poverty is acceptable in this day and age. There are several other things you can do in this country to fight period poverty:

- Make sure your college or university is undertaking initiatives to reduce the stigma and embarrassment associated with periods. [Girl Guiding UK](#) found one in five girls and young women have been made to feel ashamed or embarrassed about their period – this is simply not good enough.
- Particularly focus on making sure male students are appropriately educated about periods. Periods are a natural process, and misinformation or misunderstanding women's menstrual health leads to stigma and inequality. Most boys and young men in the UK do not have education at any age about women's menstrual cycles, other than in biology lessons.

There are also many things you can do to help improve period poverty globally. Institutions could work with one of the well-established charities that delivers sanitary items to those in developing countries, including [Action Aid](#) and [Freedom4girls](#), or they could set up their own initiative.

University of Warwick is a great example of this, with their student led social impact initiative '[Project Baala: a real solution not insaniary](#)'. It provides a two-fold solution to menstrual problems in India: Generating awareness about menstrual health and hygiene via workshops in rural areas; and distributing three reusable sanitary pads for women which can last for up to a year and a half.

**Template letter
for Students'
Unions (SUs),
students and
staff to
lobby their
institution to
provide free
sanitary
products**

Dear Vice - Chancellor/Principal,

I am writing to you to discuss the issue of Period Poverty, and the steps this university/college can take to play its part in tackling it.

There is a misconception that Period Poverty only affects those in developing countries. Period poverty affects 1 in 10 schoolgirls across the UK. Over 137,700 children in the UK have missed school because of period poverty and 68% said they felt less able to pay attention in class at school or college while menstruating. These girls risk falling 145 education days behind male counterparts. More than 1 in 3 girls (40%) in the UK have used toilet roll because they couldn't afford menstrual products.

These statistics mean that some of our students definitely live in Period Poverty. As a result, they will miss out on learning, either by missing a lecture completely, or by not being able to concentrate. They regularly risk their health by having to use makeshift sanitary towels, or using sanitary items for longer than they should.

This has huge ramifications – it leads to gender inequality when male students do not have this burden, it affects their physical health, as well as their wellbeing when they are stressed and anxious about whether their makeshift sanitary item will hold.

As an institution committed to equality for all students, we are urging you to set aside funding for free sanitary products for students. This is being offered in other universities/colleges and having a hugely positive impact on its students.

I hope to discuss this with you further, and would urge you to read **this short insight guide on Period Poverty in Universities and Colleges** for more information.

Kind regards,

STUDENTS' UNION PRESIDENT/ COLLEGE
REPRESENTATIVE

ACTIVITY IDEAS

Activities will work best if you can get staff, students and the wider community involved. We recommend that you sit down with a cross section of interested parties, a staff representative and Students' Union representative are crucial.

Some ideas for activities include:

- Open access lectures about period poverty - this would suit an academic that has researched this area and could include someone from a relevant charity or industry. Delivering a lecture on period poverty accessible virtually would also ensure more people can benefit from the lecture and can be used as an ongoing resource.
- Screening of a relevant film or TED talk – Hosting an event for students, staff and the community on period poverty is a good way to increase awareness, build knowledge and engage with people.
- Run a fundraiser – At the moment, sanitary products are not made freely available in universities (outside of Scotland)/colleges, so if you are in a university that does not fund this already, you could fundraise to provide this through the Students' Union. You could hold a menstrual-related bake sale (think red), a period themed SU night or have some fun menstrual related games that both raises money and awareness. Cards against Humanity even have a Period extension pack, if you dare...could make for an interesting board game night, allowing for conversation, engagement and destigmatisation.

ACTIVITY IDEAS cont.

- Get creative – Women’s Environmental Network (WEN) have lots of creative project ideas, from Vulva making workshops to reusable pad making sessions. You can get patterns and ideas on their [website](#).
- Host a quiz – Wen also have a brilliant Environmenstrual quiz. Just turn it into a Sli.do and you can have a fun night in or learn about a really important topic. You could even make your own quiz questions up. [Newcastle University Students’ Union](#) held a Period Poverty quiz and charged packets of tampons and sanitary towels as entrance price to donate to the Red Box Project.
- Volunteer – Find out what period poverty volunteering opportunities are near you. Your university or college might run one, or there might be one in your community. Do some research and find out.

There are a lot more ideas available on the [Girl Guides website](#), [WEN toolkit](#), and [Bloody Good Period guide to fundraising](#).

Other sources of information and campaigns:

- [Women’s Environmental Network](#)
- [PeriodPositive](#)
- [City to Sea](#)
- [No More Taboo](#)
- [Plan UK](#)
- [Study International](#)

SANITARY WASTE AND DISPOSAL

If your institution is looking at overhauling the way it approaches sanitary support for students, there is another area that should be addressed, and that is: Waste.

Behaviour change initiatives to make sure students understand sanitary products cannot be flushed down the toilet have proven successful in many institutions. You can read a recent blog from an LSE student here about a campaign called 'Free the flush' which outlines her experience with this.

But there is also an opportunity to reduce your institution's carbon footprint and cuts costs via sanitary disposal. Most institutions use plastic sanitary waste bins and pay for specialist waste management companies to dispose of sanitary waste. There are a lot of misconceptions about how sanitary waste should be dealt with – but the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Department of Health both define sanitary waste as 'offensive waste'. This means, it is not 'hazardous waste', 'clinical waste' or 'medical waste' and therefore does not fall under the same regulations. Low levels of offensive waste do not actually need to be taken away by an authorised business.

If you've produced less than 7kg of waste in your sanitary bin, you can dispose of it in your black bin waste stream (municipal waste). There is more information about this here.

A new product that is proving particularly successful is Binny. An alternative sanitary waste bin with a difference. Binny are made of cardboard with a biomaster coating which kills 99.99% of bacteria and have a specially designed malodour blocker. They can be placed directly into general black bag waste by an institution's cleaning staff, who do not see the contents. They comply with all necessary regulations and legislation.

SANITARY WASTE AND DISPOSAL cont.

More frequent emptying of the bins by cleaners means it is incorporated into the standard waste disposal scheme, rather than requiring an additional service. This cuts down on the emissions from a fleet of vehicles used to regularly empty these bins, saves use of plastic bags and water used to wash them, and can be delivered in bulk.

All Binny sanitary bins feature a healthcare message from the Cervical Cancer charity Jo's Trust on the lid to encourage staff and students to have a smear test to reduce their chances of cervical cancer.

So while updating your policies on providing free sanitary products, you should look at your sanitary waste disposal and see if there are updates required here. Savings made in disposal could be invested into free sanitary products and support.



REFERENCE LIST

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