Viewpoint

Lifting the lid on period poverty in higher education: a student engagement perspective

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Abstract
In 2018/19, Liverpool John Moores University became the first university in England to offer free menstrual products on campus. This paper shares insights from the project – called The Free Period – which was established to tackle period poverty, or menstrual hygiene management (MHM). The authors reflect on student engagement as a significant proportion of menstruators had missed classes owing to period poverty. The paper highlights the need for better dialogue and communication to: improve data; tackle stigma and taboos; and cultivate healthier relationships on campus.

Keywords
period poverty; menstruation; welfare; student engagement; student debt

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Period poverty

Amidst the chaos caused by a global pandemic, coupled with the optimism of viable vaccines discovered in near record time, another significant health story in the early weeks of 2020/21 may have eluded attention. This was the news that Scotland had become the first nation in the world to provide free and universal access to menstrual products. The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill, which was passed at Holyrood on 24 November 2020, supports a legal duty on local authorities, as well as schools, colleges and universities in Scotland, to make available period products for all those who need them.

The Period Products (Free Provision) Act had been preceded by a four year-long campaign, supported by a Scottish government pilot project in Aberdeen to deliver free menstrual products to low-income households – to tackle 'period poverty' (or menstrual hygiene management, MHM). In explaining period poverty, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) consider it to be a "lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints" (see www.rcn.org.uk). Citing a 2017 survey by girls' rights charity Plan International UK, the RCN observed that: one in ten girls had been unable to afford any menstrual products; one in seven had to borrow menstrual products from a friend, owing to affordability issues; and one in ten had to improvise a pad or tampon, owing to cost (*ibid.*).

In addressing period poverty, in 2018/19, LJMU had the distinction of being the first university in England to offer free menstrual products on campus (for students, staff and visitors). In evaluation of the project (called 'The Free Period'), we were able to get a glimpse into the scale of marginalisation and vulnerability caused by menstruation and its subsequent impact on student engagement. This article provides an insight into The Free Period and reflects on the feedback collected during the two phases of the project: The Festive Period (December 2018) and The Big Trial (from 30 April 2019). It also offers further thoughts for the future, to help determine how MHM can be promoted and how this might impact on the culture on the campus.

Changing the culture

The Free Period was a collaboration between John Moores Students' Union (JMSU) and LJMU's Estates Team. JMSU, which is a democratic, student-led entity with charitable status has a mission and vision that connects strongly with the National Union of Students' (NUS) (2016) objective of ensuring that wellbeing and welfare are central to the student experience: the JMSU vision is, simply, that students are "happy" and "confident" during their time at LJMU.

Regrettably, owing to toxic stigmas and taboos that surround menstruation, open discussions about periods and menstrual products are not common: girls and women continue to be embarrassed to disclose their struggles around what is a natural bodily process. We are all too aware of a multitude of euphemisms that abide, and these include terms like: "time of the month", "on the

rag", "female troubles/issues/problems" and "Aunt Flo". In analysis of feedback from 90,000 respondents around the world, the International Women's Health Coalition, (IWHC) (Clue and IWHC, 2016) determined that there were over 5,000 euphemisms for the word 'period' and, amongst these, they cited the following (*ibid.*):

- *Malere i opgangen* – 'Painters in the stairway" (Danish)
- *Le Beaujolais nouveau est arrivé!* – "Beaujolais nouveau has arrived!" (French)
- *Die rote Pest* – "The red plague" (German)
- *Le mie cose* – "I have my things" (Italian)
- *Monstra* – "Female monster" (Portuguese)
- *Monstri* – "Monsters" (Russian)
- *Estar del tomate* – "Be like a tomato" (meaning: 'being crazy') (Spanish)

Whilst the euphemisms themselves may seem innocuous, they reveal painfully stubborn attitudes towards MHM, which only serve to fuel myths that further ostracise and humiliate women. At home, and in cultures around the world, detrimental concepts and beliefs about menstruation have been allowed to propagate. The Free Period happened to coincide with conversations and research on global perspectives on menstruation at LJMU. For instance, LJMU development and gender studies scholars drew attention to the menstrual stigma in Nepal and the practice of *chhapaudi* (Parker and Standing, 2019). This is an ancient custom that is still practised in some parts of rural Western Nepal, despite being outlawed by the Nepalese Supreme Court in 2005, and involves the expulsion of menstruating women and girls to sheds for the duration of their period because they are perceived as impure. These feelings are internalised at a very young age by many girls, leaving "a damaging effect on their psyche and sense of self-worth" (*ibid.*).

Inspiring, young female leaders such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai are known for their respective campaigns for ecological and social justice. Another is Amika George, albeit with a lower public profile, who has been a vocal campaigner for social justice in the UK. Whilst still at school, George set in motion the campaign group Free Periods (www.freeperiods.org) with the intention of ensuring that "no young person should miss school because they menstruate".

Alongside the campaign has been the emergence of UK charities that are providing period products for schools, homeless menstruators and all who are affected by period poverty. For instance, the Red Box Project (www.redboxproject.org) use donations from local communities to provide boxes filled with menstrual products and spare underwear to more than 750 schools across the UK. More specific to Liverpool, Period Project Merseyside (www.periodprojectmerseyside.com) initially provided homeless women with period products but has since broadened its scope to include all people affected by period poverty: "to ensure that no-one goes without menstrual products or has negative feelings about their period" (*ibid.*).

The Free Period in context

In preparation for The Big Trial, JMSU purchased 19,560 individual pads and tampons from Natracare, a social enterprise that has campaigned for sustainable and eco-friendly products. In a UK study, Peberdy et al. (2019) showed that, in regard to the production of menstrual products, their environmental impact was not widely

known about or considered. Citing several sources, the study team noted that: the most popular and easily available items are non-organic tampons and disposable pads; organic disposables are only available in specific high street stores; and a regular non-organic pad can take 500-800 years to break down, whilst the plastic within many tampons will never truly biodegrade (*ibid.*).

Environmenstrual campaigns have been spearheaded by organisations such as Wen (https://www.wen.org.uk). The group has posited that menstrual pads are 90 per cent plastic and two billion menstrual items are flushed down Britain's toilets each year. Wen has supported Environmenstrual Week (held each year in October) promoting reusable and organic disposable options.

The period products were placed in baskets in each of the 221 women, gender neutral and accessible toilets at LJMU and comprised a mixture of biodegradable tampons in different sizes and biodegradable towels, which were also in different sizes and levels of absorbency. Alongside the products a poster explained why they were there whilst also highlighting a link to a survey for users to share their opinions on the trial.

Prior to The Big Trial, we had already learned during the pilot (The Festive Period) that around one in five students had skipped classes owing to their inability to afford menstrual products. The Big Trial itself shed further insight into the experiences of menstruators on campus. For instance, personal budgeting remained a constant issue as nearly half (48 per cent) of the survey respondents admitted to struggling to afford period products, often with significant impact on their dignity and learning. Some resorted to improvisation:

> *I'm really poor and can't afford to prioritise buying period products over food or rent (for example). I usually just use toilet roll but that's not sufficient and often doesn't really do the job, plus it's uncomfortable and makes me feel really self-conscious!*

In very rare cases, such improvisation – or not changing a tampon - can induce toxic shock syndrome (TSS), a bacterial infection that can be fatal. Another respondent reflected on the consequences of remaining off campus:

> *I've struggled with not having enough money during my time at university, particularly in my second year, and I would often stay home during the first couple days of my period to cut down on my use of costly sanitary products. As a consequence, I missed lectures/seminars which made it difficult to finish assignments and prepare for exams.*

We also found that period poverty has continued to follow many into university, as around half (47 per cent) indicated an inability to afford products in the past, whilst at school. As identified earlier, a concerted campaign to address period poverty in schools has achieved significant visibility and, in January 2020, the Department for Education (DfE) (2020) issued its 'period product scheme' for schools and colleges in England: the initiative has *not* been extended to learners in higher education.

We found that four in five respondents, who had come on their period unexpectedly, were forced to leave the campus because they did not have any menstrual products with them. Not only do students miss classes but they also forego opportunities to take part in extracurricular activities, such as student-led sports or society events, thus further limiting a sense of connectivity with their peers. At the time of The Free Period,

JMSU had noted other significant barriers to student engagement with clubs and societies, noting the interplay of habitus and social and cultural capital (Brereton and Mistry, 2019). We also recognised the need for a wider frame of understanding of period poverty – beyond the RCN sense of "the financial constraints": there are contexts that contribute to poverty, such as poverty of knowledge, and a lack of freedom from stigma, or dignity and rights.

Periods, for many menstruators, can be unpredictable which can make their management notoriously difficult to negotiate and be stressful. These can be caused by specific conditions, such as endometriosis or, more commonly, irregular menstrual cycles. In short, all menstruators experience periods differently which can heighten anxiety. During our trial, one student, who experienced a sudden and heavy period before entering an exam hall, felt reassured to continue to sit the examination, she recounted:

> *Because of the free products in the disabled toilet, I was able to sit my exam and do so comfortably. Had it not been for a member of staff directing me to the free products, I would have missed my exam and compromised my grade.*

Similarly, another respondent replied:

> *As a woman who has never had a normal cycle, I feel that [The Free Period] has been a brilliant idea. Although some women can keep track of their menstrual cycle easily others can't, and this can sometimes be stressful if you're out and about because you never know when it's coming. Knowing there are menstrual products on site has made me personally feel more at ease.*

Continuing the dialogue

The Free Period concluded just as the profile of MHM reached a relatively higher level of scrutiny in policy circles. In July 2019, the UK government's Period Poverty Taskforce met for the first time and, following the meeting, it immediately set about planning in three areas: improving data and evidence on period poverty; tackling stigma, shame and taboo; and identifying gaps to develop new approaches to improve access to period products (Government Equalities Office, 2019). Following the Chancellor's 2020 Budget on 11 March, it was confirmed that a zero rate of VAT (down from a five per cent charge) would be applied on menstrual products from 1 January 2021, "in the same way as food, children's clothing and books", representing an annual cost of a modest £15m to the Exchequer (Seely, 2020: 4). The abatement of the 'tampon tax' had been signalled by the UK government as a provision in the Finance Act 2016 (Section 126) (*ibid.*): a recognition of the inappropriateness in categorising tampons, sanitary pads and menstrual cups as 'non-essential, luxury goods'.

This positive direction in policy and fiscal terms should provide a stimulus to further dimensions of change on campus. Female HE students account for 57 per cent of all enrolments in England (2018/19, Higher Education Statistics Agency, ND): the ratio of female to male students has been relatively constant at 57:43/56:44 over several years. On numbers alone, it is rational to be actively promoting MHM. In our trial, a significant proportion of respondents reported a sense of pride in the university: a feeling of being cared for. It is a narrative that can connect well with prospective students and their parents, who are likely to be familiar with the agenda already established by schemes in schools in

England, Scotland and Wales (the Welsh government announced its intentions to tackle period poverty via the £2.3m Period Dignity Grant for Schools in 2019 – *Nursing Children and Young People* [2019]). At the time of writing, the Department of Education & Northern Ireland Executive pledged £2.6m, over three years from 2021/22, for a period poverty scheme in its primary and secondary schools (Department of Education, 2020).

Elevating the visibility of the welfare of women on campus – advancing gender equity in regard to health - aligns with sector concerns about student wellbeing and mental health (Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Mistry, 2018): it also serves to inform and educate male students and staff. Since September 2020, teaching both boys and girls about periods and menstrual wellbeing has been made compulsory in all state-funded primary and secondary schools in England, as part of personal, social and health education (DfE, 2020). Reducing the stigma and taboo of MHM can promote better understanding, respect and healthier relationships on campus, crucial at a time when 'laddism' has been prominent in discussions around masculinity in UK HE (Phipps, 2017; Tutchell and Edmonds, 2020).

To underline the stated priorities of the Period Poverty Taskforce, universities should be gathering evidence on how period poverty is impacting student engagement and attainment. Whilst we were able to highlight individual cases of the impact of period poverty on attendance, what about attainment? For instance, how well informed and how do exam boards or 'extenuating circumstances panels' deal with cases featuring period pain? More to the point, given the taboo of menstruation, how prepared or confident might a student be to present their case to a panel? (We know that some cultural and religious thoughts and experiences will inhibit students from putting their case forward.) Additionally, how might a 'period positive' campaign impact on behaviour change (for students or staff, especially personal tutors)?

The Free Period was well received, but a few less favourable comments were also noted. For instance, these respondents expressed 'embarrassment' or considered the trial to be 'a waste of resource'. Whilst the backgrounds of these respondents are not known, we recognise the potential problem with the term 'period poverty'. For instance, albeit in a compulsory education context, Elston and Hipkiss (2020) noted a misconception of a trial which learners thought was aimed at those from low-income families. It further illustrates the need to communicate and work closely with learners so that any scheme best meets their expectations.

Conclusion

> *Never in history have we had such a vivid blueprint for eliminating, achieving justice and ensuring peace. Never before has it been possible to troubleshoot one problem and solve so many others.*
>
> Linda Scott – *The Double X Economy*

Our conversations will continue with students and staff – female and male. Period poverty or MHM will linger as critical issues in HE but, in English compulsory education at least, there has been a decisive shift in the momentum to improve MHM and tackle the taboo of menstruation. Altogether, these policy changes can serve to inspire institutions to foster wellbeing, dignity, self-confidence and heighten a sense of empowerment and belonging on campus.

Image: *'Menstruation' by Karolina B. from The Noun Project*

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Laura Donovan-Hall *was Head of Insight at JMSU until 2019/20. Laura has been involved in developing student representation and campaigns at the Union and assisted in the management of The Free Period.*

Kay Standing *is programme leader for the MRes in Critical Social Science and a module leader for 'Body Politics, Gender, Sexuality and the Body' and 'Social Research Methods'. In addition to teaching across the sociology programme, Kay has undertaken British Academy funded research on reusable menstrual products in Nepal, and a separate Academy funded project on menstrual exclusion in Nepal. These insights have led to the undertaking of public engagement events to normalise menstruation (at the British Academy Summer School and Being Human festival). Kay is a trustee of the Women's Health Information Services Centre (WHISC), a mentor with the Girls Foundation and works closely with Period Project Merseyside.*

Virendra Mistry *co-ordinated LJMU's Student Engagement Panel between 2015 and 2020, leading workshops on student wellbeing, religious identity on campus, inclusivity, notions of respect, and sustainability in higher education with JMSU. Virendra is Editor of* Innovations in Practice *and has written and spoken extensively about student mental health.*

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