

**Written evidence submitted by Dr Katherine Neary and Dr Gemma Dale, Liverpool
Business School, Liverpool John Moores University [RHW0026]**

Dr Katherine Neary is a Senior Lecturer at Liverpool Business School. She has research interests in Responsible Management Education, Social Mobility and Healthcare Innovation.

Dr Gemma Dale is a Senior Lecturer at Liverpool Business School. She has research interests linked to wellbeing in workplaces/spaces as part of a broader interest in Human Resource Management.

Dr Neary and Dr Dale share an interest in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion issues, particularly in terms of impacts on students in an educational setting. Data gathered during a research project to explore the impact of menstruation on attendance, wellbeing and participation of students at Liverpool John Moores University from September 2024 – July 2025 informs the evidence shared below. Through a university wide e-survey and one to one interviews led by student co-researchers produced a detailed dataset of the experiences, challenges and anxieties of students who menstruate and how this impacts their education and student life.

We respond to the following questions:

Provision of effective education and quality information for girls and women on what constitutes a normal period, awareness of female reproductive health conditions and when and how to seek support.

Menstrual literacy is a term used to describe knowledge an individual's knowledge of menstruation and how to manage health and well during menstruation (Sanchez Lopez et al, 2023). Menstrual literacy is considered to be broadly low (King, 2024). Within schools, education provided to students about menstruation has been found to focus on matters of biology rather than lived experience or the management of symptoms (Brown et al, 2022).

Following a university wide e-survey at Liverpool John Moores University during the academic year 2024-25 students expressed a need for increased visibility of menstruation as part of creating a dialogue on campus. They requested that the University provide information on menstruation to help address gaps in their knowledge of the physical and psychological impacts on their wellbeing, with signposts to external sources of advice and support. Students with related medical conditions including endometriosis and PMDD recounted the impact on their studies, which were exacerbated when staff were not aware of the symptoms which characterised their condition, and how these were different from their own knowledge or lived experience.

There are compelling arguments for improving menstrual literacy. For example, improvements in menstrual literacy within schools has been associated with reduced student stress and increased self-efficacy (Long et al, 2022).

However, menstruation education/literacy needs to extend beyond girls, women and people who menstruate. Findings from the LJMU campus research found that in educational settings, like a university campus education needs to be provided to staff involved in teaching, learning and administration. Topics can include symptoms / effects, potential impacts on students and participation in education, culturally specific issues relating to menstruation and complex forms of menstruation. Such education will help staff to support students effectively. Additionally, students who menstruate continue to seek information to better understand their physical and psychological symptoms and how to manage these in a workplace environment. This requires Universities to respond through provision of digital information, access to campus based in person support and building of community. This can be supported through collaboration between the Student Union, Academic, Administrative/Professional Service and Support staff.

Furthermore, research findings from the LJMU study support the notion that peer support from fellow students, acting as champions is beneficial to supporting access to effective information and awareness raising. Gruer et al (2021) previously found student peer support to be critical to success in menstrual equity initiatives. As a result of the LJMU research current students were supported to produce peer to peer information on issues raised as important but not sufficiently understood by respondents to the survey. These materials, reviewed by Academic Staff, will be hosted on a new section of the LJMU Student Wellbeing website, and shared across Student Union communication platforms to improve access to information and support.

Adequacy of provision of free period products for girls and women who need them.

As the committee is no doubt aware, in 2020, the Government launched the Period Product Scheme providing students and colleges with period products; since launch 99% of secondary schools and 94% of post 16 education providers have ordered products (Dept. of Education, 2025). Although currently still actively in place this scheme is not available to HEIs.

Previous research has found that the provision of free period products has been found to support cultural change through visibility and normalisation of discussions about menstruation, thereby potentially contributing to the reduction of stigma associated with menstruation. Provision of free products has also been found to reduce stress associated with menstruation, although the quality of products and clear communication of such policies are both identified as important factors (Rawat et al, 2023). Yet people who menstruate and struggle to manage their symptoms are continuing to have challenges when

in an education setting (Sawyer and Sharp, 2025). There is a need for educational providers, including Universities to consider the place of policies which support these students during their degree programmes, and in doing so acknowledge the painful and debilitating challenges menstruation can present

Our research (currently in preparation for publication), based in a Higher Education Institution that provides free products to students, identified that there are barriers to engagement with / use of free period products. We found that students recognise and are appreciative of the provision of free products. However, they experience barriers to using provided products that are related to embarrassment and stigma. Some students do not wish to be seen taking or using products, especially in mixed gender facilities as they do not wish other people to be aware that they are menstruating. Similarly, students are reluctant to ask for products, for example, from another person responsible for distribution. The extent to which people who menstruate will use free products is influenced by the extent to which they perceive they meet their specific menstrual needs. Menstruation is a highly variable experience and people who menstruate will want or need to use a range of product types; the school product scheme provides for a range of products and guidance is provided on engaging with students about (inter alia) their product needs. However, a 2022 review of the scheme found that 80% of girls and young women had not been asked about what products they would like providing (Girlguiding, 2022). This suggests that education providers could do more to ensure that products meet the needs of users, fully implementing the government guidance on engaging with students.

Issues or period poverty (including the inability to afford period products) affects university students as well as those in schools and 16-19 education. We would like to see the government expand the period product scheme to reach all people who menstruate and are in education.

Education providers also need to consider student reluctance to take products through thoughtful placement of products (such as provision in individual toilet facilities / cubicles rather than in open spaces, reducing the need to ask a third party for products).

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