

Menstrual Cycle Awareness and Embodied Technologies in Higher Education

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This report is based on findings from focus groups with King's staff (four focus groups) and students (six focus groups), conducted by Amundsen and Gibson. It is also grounded in findings from a collaborative stakeholder workshop, where academic, charity, and entrepreneurial experts shared specialist insights and knowledge.

Whilst Amundsen and Gibson are listed as the authors of this report, insights from the stakeholder workshop were generated through collaboration with participants.

Any concerns related to the content of the report are the responsibility of Amundsen and Gibson, who are also the points of contact for any questions about it.

¹ Amundsen and Gibson are joint first authors, having contributed equally to all elements.

Menstrual Cycle Awareness and Embodied Technologies in Higher Education

Rikke Amundsen and Laura Gibson

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Ethics

The stakeholder workshop, entitled Digital tools and menstrual cycle awareness in the UK HE sector – Workshop, received ethical approval by the Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Panel of King's College London (rec@kcl.ac.uk) with ethical review reference number: MRA-23/24-45208.

The focus groups made part of the Menstrual Cycle Awareness and Embodied Technologies project, which received ethical approval by the Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Panel of King's College London (rec@kcl.ac.uk) with ethical review reference number: LRM-24/25-41769.

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Executive summary

This report summarises main findings from (1) ten focus groups conducted with staff and students at King's College London between May 2024 and March 2025 for the Menstrual Cycle Awareness and Embodied Technologies project, and (2) the Digital tools and menstrual cycle awareness in the UK HE sector – Workshop, held in September 2024.

Using King's as an example, the report draws on insights from the focus groups and stakeholder workshop to identify obstacles to menstrual wellbeing for staff and students at University. In doing so, it also makes recommendations on how these obstacles can be overcome, to create better working and study conditions for menstruating staff and students.

The main aims of the report are to:

- 1.** Make recommendations and provide practical advice that stakeholders in the higher education sector can use in their work to improve the study and working conditions of students and staff with a menstrual cycle, and;
- 2.** Provide a mechanism for charities, advocacy groups, and charities to advocate for the importance of menstrual health awareness in the workplace, and to raise awareness of the important work that they are doing in this area.

The main recommendations made in this report on how to improve the study and working conditions of menstruating staff and students, include the following:

- a.** Information about where students and staff can access support, guidance, and advice on menstrual wellbeing should be made more accessible. Such information could be provided through a university's app, and through posters put up across campus and in places accessible to menstruators of any gender identity.
- b.** Mandatory menstrual cycle awareness training for staff, and educational sessions for students, could raise awareness and lower barriers to discuss everyday experiences of the menstrual cycle and how it affects studying and work. A university's menstrual policy should be shared as part of this training, thus ensuring that all staff and students know and can benefit from it.
- c.** Policies regulating the organisation of individual teaching schedules and granting of student deadline extensions could be based on reformed policies grounded in enhanced (1) understanding of how cyclical embodied experience informs study and work, and (2) trust in staff and students who menstruate by expanding the nature of accepted 'evidence' of menstrual cycle-related concerns.
- d.** Large educational institutions could design and offer their own menstrual tracking app. This could prevent some of the main issues associated with commercially provided menstrual tracking apps, like privacy concerns and pay walls, whilst still enabling staff and students to track their menstrual cycles and manage work and study accordingly.

Introduction

Good menstrual health fundamentally affects whether people who menstruate can reach their full potential, including at Higher Education level.² Yet, research determining how university students' menstruation experiences impact their education experiences and attainment is very limited, particularly in high-income countries.³ Relatedly, in 2023 the British Standards Institute (BSI) published *Menstruation, Menstrual Health and Menopause in the Workplace*, a guide developed out of concern that organisations do not cater properly for the needs of menstruating employees.⁴ As they state, raised awareness of menstrual health benefits all employees. This increased public awareness of how the menstrual cycle affects workplace experiences is, however, concurrent with growing concern about privacy risks associated with tracking menstrual cycles through digital technologies like apps.⁵ These calls-to-action highlight the potential for improving how students and staff experience menstruating in HE institutions and the need to better understand whether and how embodied menstrual tracking technologies can support this.

This report details the major findings of research activities designed to address these significant gaps by assessing and raising menstrual cycle awareness amongst students and staff at King's College London, and by exploring how menstruators use – and might use – digital technologies like period tracking apps. The final recommendations are grounded in these research findings and are intended to inform changes within the HE sector to ensure menstruating staff and students are supported to meet their full potential.⁶

The research is not intended to raise menstrual cycle awareness with the intention of supporting conception and procreation, but instead is intended to empower all menstruators whatever their life choices.⁷

- 2 World Bank, *Menstrual Health and Hygiene* (12 May 2022), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/brief/menstrual-health-and-hygiene>. Munro, A. K., Hunter, E. C., Hossain, S. Z., & Keep, M. (2021). A systematic review of the menstrual experiences of university students and the impacts on their education: A global perspective. PLOS ONE, 16(9), e0257333.
- 3 Alana K. Munro et al., 'A systematic review of the menstrual experiences of university students and the impacts on their education: A global perspective,' PLOS ONE 16, no. 9 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257333>, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257333>
- 4 *Menstruation, Menstrual Health and Menopause in the Workplace*, BS 30416:2023, (British Standards Institution, May 31, 2023).
- 5 King's College London, 'Female health apps misuse highly sensitive data, study finds,' (2024). <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/female-health-apps-misuse-highly-sensitive-data-study-finds>
- 6 Munro et al., 'A systematic review of the menstrual experiences of university students and the impacts on their education: A global perspective.'
- 7 Caroline Kitchener, 'White House Assesses Ways to Persuade Women to Have More Children,' *New York Times*, April 21 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/21/us/politics/trump-birthrate-proposals.html>

Project aims

The aims of this project were to:

1. Assess and raise menstrual cycle awareness amongst students and staff in the HE sector;
2. Explore how menstruating students and staff in the HE sector might use digital tools – in particular, period tracking apps – in more embodied ways to understand their menstrual cycle.

Project objectives

The main project objective was to produce this report, and the target audience of this is stakeholders in the higher education sector as well as menstrual health charities, advocacy groups, and researchers. We hope for the report to be used by stakeholders in the higher education sector for recommendations and advice on how to improve the study and working conditions of staff and students who menstruate, and to advocate for enhanced attention being paid to menstrual wellbeing in higher education. We also hope that this report can be used by charities, advocacy groups, and researchers to advocate for the importance of menstrual health awareness and to raise awareness of the significant work that they are doing in this area.

Research activities

This report is grounded in insights from three rounds of research activities, including a pilot focus group study, a stakeholder workshop, and a final round of focus groups.

Pilot focus group study

The pilot focus group study took place in person on King's campus in May 2024. This study consisted of two focus groups led by Laura and Rikke with King's students, and one two-hour information session led by Emily Stewart from the Real Period Project.

For the pilot study, Laura and Rikke recruited eight students at King's. Our recruitment inclusion criteria was that they were a student (taught or research), aged 18 or over, with a menstrual cycle, of any gender identity. Participants were asked to attend a two-hour Real Period Project information session, which was otherwise open for all interested staff and students at King's. One focus group took place before, and one after, this information session.

The focus groups were organised around a semi-structured interview guide, with room for follow-up questions and for participants to raise issues that were initially not brought up, but which they felt it important to address. Two example questions include: (1) What kinds of messages and stories do you recall hearing about menstruation when you were growing up? And (2) What has been your experience of menstruation at King's?

With participants' consent, we recorded both focus groups.

Six participants attended all research activities, two didn't attend the information session, one didn't attend the second focus group, and one only attended the first focus group. All participants received a £20 voucher as a thank you for taking part.

Focus group study

The second round of focus groups and Real Period Project information sessions took place between November 2024 and March 2025. This time, we recruited for King's students (taught or research) *and* staff participants, aged 18 or over, with a menstrual cycle, of any gender identity. Participants were asked to attend a one-hour Real Period Project information session, followed by a same day focus group, at one of two possible times. The information sessions were exclusively for same day focus group participants. The information sessions and focus groups for staff and students were held separately.

This round of research activities involved four Real Period Project information sessions, two for students and two for staff. In all, we arranged eight focus groups; four for staff and four for students. Two information sessions (one for staff and one for students) and four focus groups (two for staff and two for students) were held in person on campus in November 2024. Two information sessions (one for staff and one for students) and four focus groups (two for staff and two for students) were held online via Teams between February and March 2025.

These focus groups were organised around a condensed version of the semi-structured interview guide used in the pilot study. Like in the pilot, participants were encouraged to raise issues that they felt it was important that we address, but that were not brought up through our questions.

With participants' consent, we recorded all focus groups.

In all, 19 members of staff and 19 students participated in this round of research. With the exception of one student focus group participant, all participants attended a Real Period Project information session before the focus group. All participants received a £20 voucher as a thank you for taking part.

Stakeholder workshop

The stakeholder workshop was arranged in September 2024. The key question driving the planning of this workshop was: '(How) can we use digital tools to improve menstrual cycle awareness in the UK HE sector, so that universities are places where menstruating bodies thrive?' The aim of the workshop was to create a space for stakeholders in this area, like charities, advocacy groups, and academics, to collaboratively unpick some of the common issues related to this topic, and to think of ways to address these. A list of workshop participants is included below, with all participants having opted in to have their names listed in a report. The workshop was carried out with a focus on higher education institutions in the UK.

The workshop was organised around two group-based activities and a final discussion. Activity 1 asked participants to discuss and envision what would be the perfect university for menstruating. Activity 2 asked participants to explore a period tracking app and to discuss a list of questions, including – but not limited to: 'Does this app raise any concerns or issues?' and 'How does it address the needs and wants of menstruating bodies in the higher education (HE) sector?'. A final discussion centered around the implications of menstrual cycle awareness in HE for gender equality. With participants' consent, we recorded all whole-group discussions and took photos of the creative outputs from the group activities, like mind maps.

Stakeholder workshop attendees

Dr Lucy van de Wiel

King's College London

Dr Lindsay Balfour

University of Glasgow

Hannah Westwood

Coventry University

Rebecca White

Wellbeing of Women

Rebecca Eldridge

King's College London and the Happy Hormones Club

Dr Kitty Jones

King's College London

Dr Helena Zavos

King's College London

Dr Jessica Agnew-Blais

Queen Mary, University of London

Nikki Berridge

Howami

Kate Penning

Howami

Rikke Amundsen

King's College London

Laura Gibson

King's College London

Empirical focus

This research project was carried out with a focus on HE institutions in the UK generally, and King's especially. The 46 focus group participants were all self-selecting staff and students at King's, aged 18 or over, with a menstrual cycle.

We recruited focus group participants of any **gender identity**. In the end, 36 focus group participants self-identified as 'female', one as 'woman', with nine not sharing about their gender identity.

In terms of **age**, five were in the age group 18-19, ten 20-24, ten 25-29, ten 30-34, two 35-39, with nine participants not sharing information about their age.

For **sexual orientation**, ten participants self-identified as 'straight', one as 'straight (heterosexual)', 15 as 'heterosexual', five as 'bisexual' one as 'cis bi', one as 'pansexual', one as 'homosexual/lesbian', one as 'female', with eleven participants not providing an answer.

In response to the question about how they would define their **'race'/ethnicity**, participants provided a broad range of answers. Our 46 participants self-identified with 23 different categories of 'race'/ethnicity. One participant identified as 'Black British – Caribbean', one as 'Black African', one as 'Nigerian', three as 'Indian', one as 'Indian-Tamil', one as 'Asian - Indian', one as 'British Indian', one as 'Brown and British Indian', one as 'Asian-Bangladeshi', one as 'Bangladeshi', one as 'Kazakh (central Asian)', one as 'East Asian', two as 'Asian', two as 'Asian/Chinese', three as 'Chinese', one as 'Han', one as 'Hispanic/Latina', one as 'Hispanic', one as 'Latina', one as 'Mexican/Latina', two as 'White', one as 'White Other', four as 'White British', one as 'White (German)', one as 'White Caucasian', one as 'Caucasian', with nine participants not providing an answer.

Core concepts

- **Menstrual cycle:** The menstrual cycle is a series of natural changes that take place in the ova-uterine reproductive system. There are changes in hormone production and in the structures of the uterus and ovaries. A menstrual cycle is measured from the first day of your period to the day before your next period. We take a holistic approach to the menstrual cycle and recognise that the actual period of menstruation—the process of the blood being released from the uterus lining—is just one phase of the cycle.⁸
- **Menstruation:** The periodic shedding of the uterine lining, manifesting itself as a flow of blood from the vagina at approximately one lunar-month intervals from menarche (first period) until the menopause, except during pregnancy.⁹
- **People who menstruate/menstruators:** This is an inclusive term that covers all bodies that experience, or have experienced, a menstrual cycle and menstruation, regardless of gender. We appreciate that experiences of menstrual cycles and menstruation can be further complicated for menstruators who are not included in/have access to gendered female spaces.
- **Embodied technologies:** Embodied technologies are physical devices or systems that allow humans to interact with the digital world through their bodies and physical actions. Designed to be both intuitive and engaging, these technologies blur the boundary between the physical and digital realms.
- **Menstrual cycle tracking technologies:** Technologies used to identify and monitor the different phases of the menstrual cycle. These include, but are not limited to, smartphone apps, temperature tracking devices, and wearable devices.

8 King's College London, *King's College London Menstruation Policy* (2021).

9 Oxford English Dictionary, 'menstruation, n,' in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

The Real Period Project

Aims and objectives

The Real Period Project CIC (RPP) envisages a world where it is safe for everyone to experience and talk about menstruation. A not-for-profit community interest company committed to bringing about cultural change, it works to combat menstrual shame and taboos by developing and delivering accurate, accessible, and inclusive menstrual education that raises awareness of the whole menstrual cycle. The RPP emphasises and dignifies each stage of the menstrual cycle as an embodied experience so that menstruators can be self-aware and fully informed to make decisions about and advocate for their health and fertility.

Since its incorporation in 2016 the project has delivered teaching sessions and training for schools, universities, city and district councils, menstrual product companies and community settings. They work with children, young people and students, parents, teachers and school leaders, youth workers, university staff, council public health leaders, company directors and people of all walks of life who menstruate. Their work focuses on both the delivery of menstrual wellbeing sessions for all ages and training of others to deliver effective, accessible, inclusive and empowering menstrual education. To date, the project has produced and delivered primary and secondary school lesson plans and spiral curriculum, educational tools for use in multiple settings, university menstrual wellbeing sessions and Period Friendly Schools guidance and training for schools, colleges and district councils. They are available for consultation and training delivery.

Information sessions

The information sessions were designed to deliver a succinct and focused one-hour introduction to menstrual cycle wellbeing for students and staff, in person and online. The intention was emphasising the value of menstrual cycle awareness and tracking to build self-trust and encourage self-advocacy. Comments and thoughts were welcomed and invited throughout the sessions. Short surveys and quizzes assessed existing knowledge and informed the depth of teaching.

The sessions were divided into four sections aimed at emphasising the value of and methods used to increase menstrual literacy for health and wellbeing. Below is a summary of the main points discussed in each section.

1. How periods are seen today:

- How the provenance of menstrual shame and taboos continue to affect the menstrual experience.¹⁰
- How medicalisation of the ovo-uterine reproductive experience individualises menstrual suffering, ignoring negative societal conditioning.¹¹
- How advertising terminology in the media negatively impacts experiences.¹²
- Why there is an apparent imperative to conceal menstruation to gain acceptance and safety.¹³
- How increased awareness of shame can empower a rebuttal of culturally negative attitudes towards menstruation and a greater acceptance of the body as a whole.

10 Brené Brown, 'Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame,' *Families in Society* 87 (01/01 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.3483>

11 Peter Conrad, 'Medicalization and Social Control,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (11/28 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.18.080192.001233>

12 M. Simes and D. Berg, 'Surreptitious learning: Menarche and menstrual product advertisements,' *Health care for women international* 22 (07/01 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1080/073993301317094281>

13 Jill M. Wood, '(In)Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative,' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, ed. Chris Bobel et al. (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020).

2. Body literacy:

- How to identify internal reproductive organs involved in menstruation and phases of the menstrual cycle.
- How to recognise normal and ‘red flag’ symptoms; and when and how to seek help.
- How the menstrual cycle is a stress sensitive system, and menstrual suffering is potentially an indication of underlying pathology or distress.
- Why we must refuse to view the menstruating body as deficient and ‘in need of correction’.¹⁴

3. Getting to know your own menstrual cycle:

- How cyclical ovarian and uterine changes, as well as emotional and physical signs, can be tracked to establish an individual’s cycle pattern.
- How recognising the signs of ovulation can be used as a predictor for period arrival and preparation.
- How different tools can be used to track menstrual cycles.
- Why digital safety and privacy should be considered when selecting tools.

4. Managing work and study using your menstrual cycle

- How deepening awareness of personal experience and patterns across the whole menstrual cycle can support a more self-compassionate and empowered approach to work and study planning.
- How awareness of other daily, weekly and monthly cycles and patterns can help build this same self-compassion and agency for people not menstruating.

¹⁴ Chris Bobel, *The Managed Body: Developing Girls and Menstrual Health in the Global South* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Obstacles, recommendations and opportunities

This section lists the main obstacles to, and opportunities and recommendations for enhancing menstrual wellbeing in universities. These are obstacles, opportunities and recommendations that were recognised and put forward by participants in the staff and student focus groups, and in the stakeholder workshop.

The obstacles, recommendations and opportunities are organised according to four main areas: 1) built environment, 2) organisational structure, 3) institutional policies, and 4) menstrual cycle tracking and digital tools.

Built environment

This section considers how the built environment in which the University's principal activities – for example, lectures, seminars, laboratory work, tutorials – take place affects the experience of menstruating bodies.

Obstacles to menstrual wellbeing conjured by the built environment

- There is a disparity in toilet facilities across campus, with some being entirely inadequate, due to:
 - Limited physical space in cubicles to change period products;
 - Overflowing bins preventing the disposal of used period products and presenting a hygiene issue;
 - Lack of facilities to privately manage re-usable period products like period cups, which need washing;
 - Insufficient number of toilets for menstruators, frequently leaving those working or studying in busier areas queuing for access when menstrual needs (like the need to change a period product) can be urgent.
- The provision of free period products on campus is uneven. Some places have no such products, with others not being restocked sufficiently frequently.
- Staff and students working off campus, like those on placements, don't receive free period products.

- The current notification procedures about needing to restock the free period products on campus are not working, with those calling the number provided being passed between offices, all rejecting their responsibility in this matter.
- There are not sufficient quiet spaces on campus for staff and students to withdraw when negatively affected by their menstrual cycle, for example because of menstrual cramps. Not having such spaces available, may leave staff and students with menstrual cycles compelled to work and study from home at certain times of their cycle.

Recommendations and opportunities for menstrual wellbeing conjured by the built environment

- Information about where to access support, guidance, and advice on menstrual wellbeing should be more accessible. Such information could be provided through a university provided app – like the King's app – via posters in the toilet facilities, and/or along with free period products in a 'welcome pack' distributed at the start of the academic year for incoming students or when commencing a post for new staff. This information should include insights on:
 - How to recognise menstrual cycle red flags and where to seek further support;
 - Where to access help and support with managing one's menstrual cycle whilst working or studying at the university;
 - Where free period products are located;
 - The location on campus of toilet facilities suiting different needs (for example, where there are facilities to clean a period cup, or where the toilet cubicles are large enough to comfortably change a period product).

- The existing procedures for alerting maintenance staff to issues like overflowing toilet bins and empty stocks of free period products, must be streamlined and the responsibility for managing such issues formalised.
- Staff and students who menstruate, but who work off-site should also have access to the free period products provided by the institution. A system should be put in place to ensure that these staff and students are not excluded from this offer.
- To facilitate equal opportunities among all staff and students to work on campus, more quiet spaces should be made available. Such spaces could be used by staff and students in need of space to, for example, manage pain related to their menstrual cycle.

Where I have the time before I start feeling like I'm bleeding I will make an active decision to go to a nicer toilet. Even if it's not on my floor, I will make the journey.

Participant 4, Staff in Person Focus Group 1

Organisational structure

This section considers the activities that direct how the University can meet its organisational aims—including roles and responsibilities, work delegation, and information flows—and how these affect the experience of menstruating staff and students.

Obstacles to menstrual wellbeing conjured by organisational structure

- The intersectional gender dynamics within each department have a significant impact on how menstruating staff and students behave and feel about accommodating their menstrual cycle needs. In departments where senior authority figures are primarily male (and white) and do not initiate discussions about menstruation, more junior menstruators feel disempowered to discuss any menstruation-related challenges they face.
- A lack of education and understanding amongst senior staff about how the menstrual cycle can affect menstruators in their study and work, can constitute a barrier among staff and students to seek support and make accommodations when experiencing menstruation-related challenges, like pain.
- There is a concern that raising and experiencing menstruation issues will be perceived as a sign of weakness amongst senior staff and colleagues. Consequentially, there is a concern that raising such issues will be career limiting and/or negatively influencing experiences of study. In some cases, this leads to a continued culture of concealment and shame.
- Overcoming a culture of menstrual shame and taboos is difficult, where menstruating bodies are held individually responsible for managing their cycles and any associated complications.

Recommendations and opportunities for menstrual wellbeing conjured by organisational structure

- When (cis-male) managers and senior figures are supportive and open about how the menstrual cycle can affect staff and students, this improves the working situation for menstruators, both practically (eg pain killers were more readily available) and socially (as barriers to share and report on menstruation related concerns were lowered).
- Mandatory menstrual cycle awareness training amongst all university staff could raise awareness and lower barriers to discuss everyday experiences of the menstrual cycle and how it affects studying and work.
- Mandatory menstrual cycle educational sessions for all students during fresher's week, similar to those conducted to teach students about sexual consent, can raise awareness amongst students with and without a menstrual cycle. This can, in turn, facilitate more understanding between students during, for instance, seminars and when doing group work.
- Universities could appoint a specific wellbeing and welfare officer for menstrual issues – or a menstrual health first aider – to provide menstruating staff and students with a point of contact for advice, support, and guidance on how to conduct work and study if affected by their menstrual cycles.

The structural changes that might be put into place to bring about, say, menstrual equity also end up [...] benefiting or making the world of the university more equitable for other folks that face marginalisation or oppression.

Participant 5, Stakeholder Workshop

Institutional policies

This section considers what policies to develop, implement, and act on at the University to better accommodate the menstrual wellbeing of staff and students.

Obstacles to menstrual wellbeing conjured by institutional policies

- The academic calendar, deadlines, and formal procedures for applying for deadline extensions are not considering the cyclical embodied experiences of staff and students, generating obstacles to menstrual wellbeing like:
 - Deadlines and exams coinciding with, eg days or weeks of foreseen pain or exhaustion;
 - Procedures for asking for deadline extensions, like submitting mitigating circumstances forms (MCFs), generally not accepting individual accounts of lived experience as sufficient evidence to grant extensions or of future expected obstruction to wellbeing;
 - Teaching activities being organised back-to-back, without scheduled time to use bathroom facilities, rest, and/or eat.
- Whilst King's has a menstruation policy lauded by some staff participants, many staff and student participants had no knowledge of the policy. A lack of awareness of such policies prevents staff and students from benefitting from it, especially in cases where senior staff consequently fail to raise awareness about the opportunities it provides among the staff and/or students that they manage.

Recommendations and opportunities to menstrual wellbeing conjured by institutional policies

- Policies regulating the organisation of individual teaching schedules and granting of student deadline extensions could be based on reformed policies grounded in enhanced understanding of how cyclical embodied experience informs study and work, thus:
 - Allowing staff more time to rest and use toilet facilities between teaching sessions and meetings;
 - Accepting individual accounts of menstrual cycle-related issues as reasons for extensions on MCFs;
 - Enhancing trust in staff and students who menstruate by expanding the nature of accepted 'evidence' of menstrual cycle-related concerns, reducing the number of forms, and rejecting the need for evidence provided by third parties, like a GP.
- Menstruation policies should be shared with all staff and students when they join the university, and they should be made part of the mandatory training of managers and senior staff.

I was just thinking [...] how [this other participant] said that your team is very open about these things and you were aware of the policy, whereas I wasn't and it's not really spoken about in my team. So I'm just wondering if sometimes it just depends on who the manager is and what their priorities are or what they're aware of even themselves.

Participant 1, Staff Online Focus Group 2

Menstrual cycle tracking and digital technologies

This section considers how the University can facilitate staff and students' safe and informative menstrual cycle tracking with digital technologies, focusing especially on the use of menstrual cycle tracking applications (apps).

Obstacles to menstrual wellbeing conjured by menstrual cycle tracking and digital technologies

- Whilst broadly popular among students and staff participants, menstrual cycle tracking technologies can be heteronormative, emphasising (straight) reproduction, and often highly gendered in foregrounding normative femininity (eg using pink colour schemes and flower and heart symbols).¹⁵ These technologies do not, therefore, often account for the menstrual cycle experiences of members of the LGBTQIA+ community and/or people not identifying with normative femininity.
- Menstrual cycle tracking technologies, and especially apps, don't usually account for diversity of menstrual experience or for the experiences of those whose menstrual cycle falls outside of what is considered 'normal'.¹⁶ When it comes to health and human experience, the concept of 'normal' is already a problematic term.¹⁷

15 Rachael Louise Healy, 'Zuckerberg, get out of my uterus! An examination of fertility apps, data-sharing and remaking the female body as a digitalized reproductive subject,' *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 4 (2021/05/19 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1845628>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1845628>

16 See also: Naomi Jacobs and Jenneke Evers, 'Ethical perspectives on femtech: Moving from concerns to capability-sensitive designs,' *Bioethics* 37, no. 5 (2023), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.13148>, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/bioe.13148>

17 Kate Clancy, *Period: The Real Story of Menstruation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023).

- Digital tracking of menstrual cycles can generate significant privacy concerns, especially because these often lack clarity about where the data is stored, who can access it, and for what purposes it will/can be used, especially where it is assumed that such data is used for commercial purposes.¹⁸
- Digital tracking technologies like apps can be expensive, with useful educational information often being behind a paywall.
- When educational institutions or other employers promote the tracking of menstrual cycles – whether that is through digital tools or manually – there is the risk that this might responsibilise staff and students, rendering them responsible for managing their menstrual cycles and alerting the institution if or when they need support.
- There should be the opportunity to record a broader range of experiences, and the app should not be grounded in limited understandings of a ‘normal’ menstrual cycle;
- The app should be free, and no information should be hidden behind a paywall.
- Menstrual cycle tracking should be presented to staff and students as an activity for their benefit only (with one exception, as per the point below). To avoid staff and student responsibilisation through providing a free menstrual cycle tracking app, institutions should not rely on these for evidence to be used, for example, in support of applications for deadline extensions or in requests to work from home.
- Data generated through a university-provided menstrual cycle tracking app could be used to inform research on menstrual health and menstrual cycle awareness. The design and implementation of such an app could thus make part of a university’s overall effort to enhance menstrual health and wellbeing, and to contribute to research in the area of women’s health that is largely understudied, despite its relevance for a large part of the population.¹⁹

Recommendations and opportunities for menstrual wellbeing conjured by menstrual cycle tracking and digital technologies

- There is room here for large educational institutions, managing a high number of staff and students with menstrual cycles, to design and offer their own menstrual tracking app. Such an app could prevent some of the main issues associated with commercially provided menstrual tracking apps, whilst still providing staff and students with the functionality of a technology app that enables them to track their menstrual cycles and manage work and study accordingly. The design of such an app should hence be grounded in the following recommendations:
 - Menstrual cycles should be presented in a less gendered and heterosexual context, making it more inclusive and accounting for menstrual cycle awareness among the LGBTQIA+ community;

So it's kind of like between a rock and a hard place of needing to use something [to track the menstrual cycle], but not trusting any of those that are available. And they're all constantly just pop ups, 'Buy this, pay for this'. And it's really irritating. They're not nice user interfaces. They're just, it's a huge shame, feels like there's a huge gap for something that's actually coming from a good place, rather than a make money and exploit people place.

Participant 7, Student Pilot in Person Focus Group

18 Privacy International, ‘No Body’s Business But Mine: How Menstruation Apps Are Sharing Your Data,’ (2019). <https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/3196/no-bodys-business-mine-how-menstruations-apps-are-sharing-your-data>. See also: King’s College London, ‘Female health apps misuse highly sensitive data, study finds.’

19 Andrew Gregory, ‘Concerning’ lack of female-only medical trials in UK, say health experts,’ *The Guardian*, May 7 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/07/concerning-lack-of-female-only-medical-trials-in-uk-say-health-experts?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Final reflections

To address the obstacles, and act on the opportunities and recommendations put forward by this report, the University should put together and collaborate closely with staff and student stakeholder working groups. The lived experience of these stakeholders constitutes expert advice. Listening to them would help ensure that all changes made are of direct benefit to those affected.

Given that menstruation is an under-researched field that has historically ignored marginalised and racialised communities, the types of evidence accepted as medical proof of normal or abnormal menstruation is currently too limited. The University should broaden its understanding of what constitutes acceptable evidence of menstrual complications so that it is grounded also in lived experiences.

Marginalised communities have historically combatted stigmatisation and shame by fighting for visibility. Securing the visibility of menstruators is a step towards achieving menstrual liberation and is something the University can actively facilitate and support.

Introducing a menstrual tracking app for the benefit of menstruating students and staff, that also generates data for further research into menstrual health and wellbeing, would place the University at the forefront of measures taken to ensure equity, diversity and inclusion and equal access to education. It would also demonstrate the University's commitment to research in areas of health and wellbeing that are largely understudied, underfunded, and politically under threat.

Education is for everybody, not just people who menstruate, so that people understand that the whole role of this is not to give people special treatment, but it's to kind of bring it to a level and that that benefits everybody.

Participant 6, Stakeholder Workshop

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