

Making chemistry more accessible at a university by providing period products

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How your department can implement a Sustainable Period Product Scheme in five steps. Credit: *Trends in Chemistry*, Gardner et al.

When it comes to the question of who gets to be a scientist, gender disparities are well-documented in many fields. Patching the infamous "leaky pipeline" can be a thorny problem, but during the 2022–2023 school year, the Department of Chemistry at the University of Oxford took a simple and practical step forward: they began offering period products in the department's bathrooms.

In an article published October 25 in the journal *Trends in Chemistry*, three students involved in the Oxford Period Project and their supervising professor share the project's success and offer advice for how others can implement this accommodation at their own institutions.

Before October 2022 in Oxford's [chemistry](#) department, period products were available in some female bathrooms, but they were more expensive

than products sold elsewhere. And while food vending machines in the department had been updated to take card payments, the department's period products still needed to be purchased with coins.

"In the [worst-case scenario](#), a [student](#) needing period products would have to ask peers for spare coins or products or leave the department to find or buy products elsewhere. Both options are stressful alternatives and often not compatible with the high number of contact hours a chemistry degree involves," write Elba Feo, Sofia Olendraru, Charlie H. Simms, and Michael O'Neill, three chemistry students at Oxford and their chemistry professor.

Inspired by [a 2018 report](#) from the Royal Society of Chemistry, the students lobbied to make free period products available to all chemistry students and faculty. The department administration had some misgivings about the project, including concerns about people "hoarding" free products. Nevertheless, pads and tampons were made available in open baskets near the sinks of female bathrooms beginning in fall 2022.

The feedback has been positive. "Students feel supported, especially during long lab sessions where the few short breaks make it difficult to mitigate period emergencies if products are inaccessible," writes the team.

The authors offer some suggestions to help make future projects even more successful. They note that the current products provided are not eco-friendly and are presently only stocked in female bathrooms. Going forward, they suggest providing a sign-up for free menstrual cups as a more sustainable option and underline the importance of using inclusive language to both reduce the stigma around periods and to be inclusive of people of all genders who menstruate.

The authors hope that their project can inspire other university departments to take this first step towards inclusivity. They write, "Access to free [period](#) products has been incredibly well received by students and staff, and it is an easy and practical way to improve the experience of studying chemistry for those with periods."

More information: Periods and practicals: how to help your students, *Trends in Chemistry* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.trechm.2023.09.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trechm.2023.09.003)

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