LA TROBE STUDENT UNION

DIGNITY IS NOT DIRTY

PERIOD POVERTY

AT LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

REPORT 2026

Run by Students, For Students

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNION

latrobesu.org.au

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

La Trobe Student Union acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands, skies and waterways across Australia. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and acknowledge the continuing strength, knowledge and leadership of First Nations communities.

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FROM OUR EXEC

Periods should never be a barrier to learning. Yet too many La Trobe students told us they are stretching products beyond safe limits, improvising with unsuitable materials, missing classes or activities, and going without altogether. Dignity Is Not Dirty was created to listen to students and press for practical change, because dignity is essential to participation, safety and wellbeing on campus.

This report shows what students told us and what needs to change. La Trobe University can remove a predictable barrier to education by making free period products visible, available and reliably stocked wherever students study, work, live and participate on campus.

FROM OUR WOMEN'S OB

La Trobe University is one of the only universities in Australia that does not have free period products for students on campus. In 2026 this is incredibly shameful!
So, last year when I was campaigning to become one of your Women's Officers, one of my key policies was getting free period products into bathrooms, which received overwhelming support from students when I spoke with them. When I was fortunate enough to be elected as one of your Women's Officers, that became one of my main goals. So, the LTSU conducted a survey to hear directly from students - which confirmed what we suspected - students are demanding that the university must do better to support students who menstruate.

Periods can be extremely painful, and the rising cost of period products can be prohibitive, but periods should never be a barrier in accessing education and universities need to make learning environments more accessible for students who menstruate. I understand firsthand the pain not only physically, but also financially, that periods bring.

Ever since I began menstruating at age 12, I've had to miss days of school due to the debilitating pain it brought me. Now that I am older, I am shocked each time I go to the supermarket to purchase period products, and I see the prices go up.

Unfortunately, I am not alone in my experience, and many people share an all too similar experience, or even worse in some situations, which is highlighted in this report. Students are begging for help, especially during this cost-of-living crisis we are living in, and La Trobe University must help! If La Trobe University can afford to pay our Vice Chancellors almost $1 million, but they choose not to support students when it really matters, it just highlights how out of touch they are. The LTSU is calling on La Trobe University to do better for students and install free period products in our bathrooms, so that students can have reliable access to free period products, meaning they don't have to forgo their learning just to get by.

Sarina Godden
LTSU Women's Officer

UNDERSTANDING PERIOD POVERTY

Period poverty is commonly understood as inadequate access to menstrual products, information, safe and private facilities, hand-washing facilities and appropriate waste disposal. It also includes the effects of stigma, embarrassment and the inability to manage menstruation safely and with dignity.



Period poverty can reduce educational participation and is linked to shame, lower self-esteem and mental health impacts. It also notes that the burden is often greater for people who are already marginalised. Free period products offer equity, dignity and better student wellbeing.

For university students, the issue sits within a broader cost-of-living context. A recurring monthly cost may appear modest in isolation, but it competes with food, transport, rent, medication and study expenses. When products are unavailable at the point of need, the consequences can be immediate: leaving a class, travelling across campus, asking another person for help, buying an expensive emergency pack, or going without.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our findings show that affordability, inconsistent access and poor visibility are affecting students' health, confidence and ability to participate in university life.

60.7% of respondents said they could only sometimes afford period products or struggle to afford them.

40.0% reported wearing products longer than recommended, while 29.8% had improvised with toilet paper or fabric.

19.5% had skipped classes or social activities because of period product access or affordability.

50% reported difficulty focusing because of stress or discomfort, and 51.0% reported reduced confidence in social or academic settings.

43.1% did not know free products were available, 40.3% did not know where to find them, and 36.6% said products were not available in the bathrooms they use. Students strongly favoured free products across campus and free dispensing machines in bathrooms.

The central finding is straightforward: limited access to period products is not merely an inconvenience. It is an equity and participation issue. Students cannot participate on equal terms when a basic health need depends on whether they have money, know where to ask for help, or can leave class to cross campus to find a product.

60.7%
of respondents said they could only sometimes afford period products or struggle to afford them

40%
reported wearing products longer than recommended

50%
reported difficulty focusing because of stress or discomfort

PRIORITY ACTIONS

01 Introduce universal free provision in student-accessible bathrooms across the Melbourne Bundoora campus, including all-gender bathrooms.

02 Publish and maintain a simple campus-wide location map and clear online information.
Use dispensers or other discreet self-service access points, supported by a documented restocking system.

03 Provide a practical choice of products, including pads, tampons and pathways to reusable options.

04 Establish student-led monitoring, public reporting and a formal review after the first year.

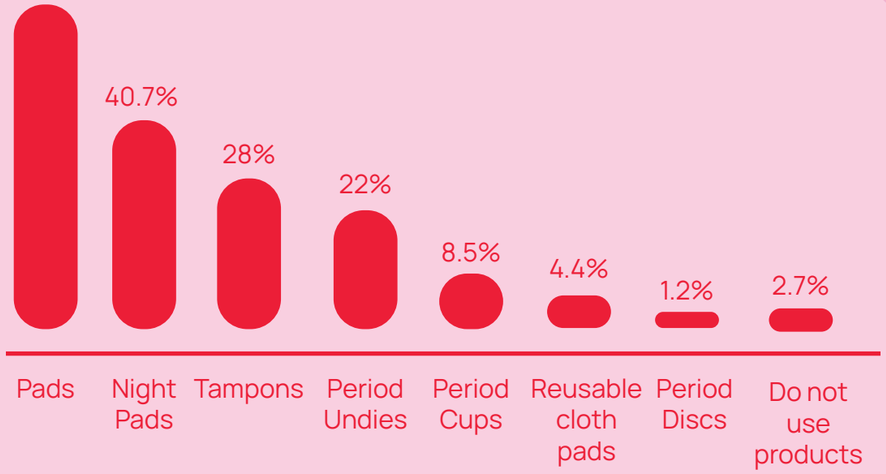


KEY FINDINGS

01

Products students use

Students reported using a range of disposable and reusable products:



Pads remain the most used product, which supports their inclusion as the foundation of any universal program. However, demand is not limited to standard disposable pads. A meaningful program should provide tampons and consider how students can access reusable products and reliable health information about their use and care.

02

Affordability and monthly cost

Only 39.3% of respondents said they could always afford the period products they need. A further 48.3% said affordability depended on the month, while 12.4% said they struggled to afford products. Combined, 60.7% experienced affordability pressure at least some of the time.

Reported monthly spending was:



Seventy-one per cent reported spending between $10 and $30 each month. This recurring cost compounds other student expenses. The consistency of this theme across campuses strengthens the case for treating access as basic student infrastructure.

ONLY 39.3%
of respondents said they could always afford the period products they need

48.3%
said affordability depended on the month

KEY FINDINGS



03

Coping strategies and health risks

When students could not readily access products, they reported coping in ways that may be unsafe, uncomfortable or exclusionary:

- Borrowing products or relying on free sources: 46.6%.
- Wearing products longer than recommended: 40.0%.
- Improvising with toilet paper or fabric: 29.8%.
- Skipping classes or social activities: 19.5%.

These findings show why an emergency-only or request-based model is inadequate. Students should not need to disclose personal circumstances, leave a class, locate a staffed service or ask another person for a product. Access should be discreet, immediate and available at the point of need.

Product access should also be accompanied by concise, reputable health information. The aim is not to medicalise menstruation, but to ensure students can make informed choices and know where to seek assistance for severe pain, unusually heavy bleeding or other concerns.

46.6%
of respondents rely on borrowing or free resources

29.8%
of respondents reported improvising with toilet paper or fabric

40%
of respondents report wearing products longer than recommended

19.5%
of respondents report skipping classes or social activities

04

Academic participation and wellbeing

- 27.1% reported not attending university activities.
- 50.0% reported difficulty focusing because of stress or discomfort.
- 51.0% reported reduced confidence in social or academic settings.

The effect is therefore broader than class attendance. It includes concentration, confidence, social connection and willingness to remain on campus.

A student who cannot manage menstruation safely and discreetly is not participating on equal terms. Universal access is therefore a practical educational inclusion measure.



27.1%
reported not attending university activities.

50%
reported difficulty focusing because of stress or discomfort.

51%
reported reduced confidence in social or academic settings.

KEY FINDINGS



05

Current access and visibility at La Trobe Melbourne Bundoora

Students reported using the following sources when they needed products on campus:

65.7%
Bringing their own products

34%
Asking a friend

26.2%
Buying products on or near campus

9.9%
Using the La Trobe Student Union Food Bank

3.4%
Obtaining products from university departments

11.2%
Using dispensing units

6.5%
Going without

Reported barriers to free products were:

43.1%
Did not know free products were an option

40.3%
Did not know where products were located

36.6%
Products were not available in the bathrooms used by students

18.7%
Products had run out

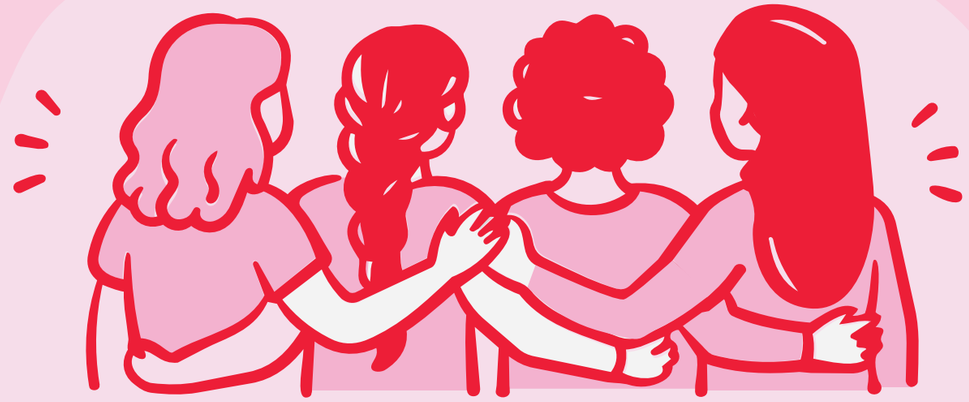
25.2%
Felt uncomfortable asking

These results show that availability and visibility must be addressed together. A product that exists somewhere on campus but cannot be located quickly, is only available during staffed hours, or regularly runs out does not provide reliable access.

As of August 2026, La Trobe University's public information identifies free menstrual and sexual health items at The Retreat in HU3-105 at Bundoora. The University's food relief webpage also refers to free period products through student food bank and pantry arrangements at some campuses.

This is useful support, but the public information does not demonstrate universal, clearly mapped access in bathrooms across Melbourne Bundoora.

The survey results indicate that many students remained unaware of available products or could not access them in the bathrooms they use.



KEY FINDINGS

06

What students want



49.9%
Free products across campus



44.7%
Vending machines in bathrooms



20.3%
Financial support



11.7%
Education and awareness

The strongest preferences are for universal availability and discreet bathroom-based access. These options reduce the need to ask, travel, explain or wait. They also make the service part of normal campus infrastructure, comparable to toilet paper, soap and hand-drying facilities.



LESSONS FROM OTHER UNIVERSITIES

The University of Melbourne Student Union's 2025 report is useful because it moves beyond describing the problem and proposes an operational model. Its survey of 703 students found very strong support for free period products, documented the effect of cost and access on academic participation, described a local dispenser trial, and recommended a specific ratio of dispensers, regular refilling and a feedback mechanism for shortages.

Three features are particularly relevant to La Trobe:

- Specificity: the report identifies where products should be installed and how provision should be scaled, rather than relying on general commitments.
- Operational accountability: it proposes regular restocking, shortage reporting and review of usage data.
- Student voice: it connects survey figures to the practical realities of leaving class, travelling across campus, sacrificing other essentials and experiencing embarrassment.

Western Sydney University. It defines period poverty as a combined problem of products, education, facilities, hygiene and waste management, and emphasises stigma and unequal impacts. For La Trobe, this means a product program should be designed alongside suitable bathrooms, disposal units, hand-washing facilities, inclusive communication and education.



RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Establish universal free access

La Trobe University should provide free pads and tampons in student-accessible bathrooms across the Melbourne Bundoora campus, including all-gender bathrooms. Provision should prioritise locations used for teaching, libraries, the Agora, student union and its student lounges, health and wellbeing services, sport, late-night study and student accommodation.

02

Use discreet self-service access

Products should be available through reliable dispensers or clearly marked self-service units. Access should not depend on asking a staff member, proving financial hardship or attending during office hours. Dispensers should be positioned inside bathrooms wherever practicable.



03

Provide appropriate product range

Every location should provide standard pads and tampons. Higher-use sites should also provide night or higher-absorbency pads. The University and LTSU should develop a complementary reusable product initiative, including subsidised or free period underwear or cups and clear information about safe use and cleaning.

04

Create a reliable restocking system

The University should nominate the area responsible for procurement, restocking and maintenance. Each location should have a documented check frequency, minimum stock threshold and backup supply. A QR code or simple online form should allow students to report an empty or damaged dispenser without identifying themselves.

05

Make locations visible

A current list and map of product locations should be available through the La Trobe website, student app, campus maps, orientation materials and bathroom signage. Communications should be plain, inclusive and easy to find through common search terms such as free pads, tampons and period products.

RECOMMENDATIONS

06 Design for inclusion

Products should be available in women's and all-gender bathrooms and in locations accessible to students with disability. Consultation should include trans and gender-diverse students, international students, First Nations students, students living on campus, students with disability and students from regional and culturally diverse communities.

07 Access facilities and disposal

The University should audit whether bathrooms containing period products also have functioning hand-washing facilities, privacy, accessible sanitary disposal units and appropriate cleaning and waste arrangements. Product access cannot be separated from the facilities needed to manage menstruation safely.



08 Provide information and reduce stigma

Brief information should explain what is available, where to find it, how to report a shortage and where to seek health or wellbeing support. Awareness should be incorporated into orientation and student communications without presenting menstruation as shameful or exceptional.

09 Fund the program as core student infrastructure

Fund the program as core student infrastructure
The program should have a recurring University budget rather than depend primarily on donations or short-term grants. Where SSAF is used, expenditure and outcomes should be transparent and students should be consulted through LTSU.

10 Establish governance and public accountability

A joint implementation group should include student union elected representatives and relevant University areas. It should publish the rollout plan, locations, service standards, usage data, outage information and review findings. Student feedback should guide expansion and changes to product mix.

METHODOLOGY

La Trobe Student Union (LTSU) received 472 survey responses. Of all respondents, 97.9% were enrolled students. The survey asked about menstruation, product use, affordability, coping strategies, academic and wellbeing impacts, current access and preferred solutions. The responses were predominantly from the Melbourne Bundoora campus. Most respondents were aged 18–25, most identified as women, and 52% were international students. The survey therefore provides a strong account of the experiences of the students who responded, especially at Bundoora, but should not be treated as a statistically representative sample of every La Trobe campus or every student who menstruates.
Important limitations

- Participation was voluntary, so students with stronger experiences or concerns may have been more likely to respond.

- The survey was concentrated at Melbourne Bundoora as La Trobe Student Union is only allowed to operate on this campus.

- The demographic profile means further targeted consultation is needed with gender-diverse students, students with disability, students living on campus, First Nations students, regional students and students from culturally diverse communities.

WHO RESPONDED

472
Total responses

97.9%
Currently enrolled students (462)

94.4%
Of respondents have periods

82%
Were aged 18-25

95%
Identified as women

52%
International students

97%
Were based at Melbourne, Bundoora

The high proportion of international student respondents is important. International students may face additional financial pressure, limited eligibility for some forms of support, unfamiliarity with campus services and discomfort asking for assistance. These factors should inform both product distribution and communication.

CONCLUSION

La Trobe students have been clear. Period products need to be free, visible, reliable and available where students are. The survey shows that affordability pressure and inconsistent access are contributing to unsafe coping strategies, missed participation, reduced concentration and lower confidence.

Existing support through locations such as The Retreat and food relief services is valuable, but it is not a substitute for universal bathroom-based access. A campus-wide program, supported by reliable restocking, accessible facilities, clear information and student oversight, would remove a predictable barrier to education and make La Trobe a more equitable place to study.

Period products are a necessity. Providing them should be treated as a normal part of a safe, inclusive and functional university campus.



WHO ARE WE

We are led by students, for students. We are here for students during their time at La Trobe Melbourne Bundoora.
We will make sure students feel part of a community.
We will support students to stand up and speak out for what they believe in.

There's strength in numbers! La Trobe University Student Union (LTSU) is the largest student or staff peak representative body at La Trobe University.

Our representation is led by and for students and incorporates the International Students Collective and MASO (Mature Age Students Organisation) www.latrobesu.org.au hello@latrobesu.org.au (03) 9479 – 2314

Established in 1967, the purpose of the LTSU is to advance the education of students of La Trobe University by: · enhancing the learning experience of students while at the University; · promoting the interests and welfare of students; · representing students within and outside the University; · co-ordinating and supporting the activities of students; and · providing amenities and services for students, other members of the University community and the public. · providing amenities and services for students, other members of the University community and the public

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Run by Students, For Students

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