**\*Please provide a description introducing your organisation, service or interest in oracy.**

STAMMA is the national charity for anyone affected by stammering, or who’s job role brings them into contact with students, staff, colleagues or customers who stammer. Our website is [www.stamma.org](http://www.stamma.org). Stammering is common and can be very variable. Up to 8% of children stammer for at least a while, and *at least* 1% of adults stammer. See here for a brief overview of the experience of stammering: <https://stamma.org/features/consequences-stammering>.

STAMMA’s interest in oracy is related to these factors:

1. Many students who stammer find the oral elements of education particularly challenging and, in some cases, traumatic. This can have long-term negative consequences for those students. There are already concerns regarding a lack of support and understanding for students who stammer in education, and it is important to us that this situation is improved particularly as there is a growing focus on weaving oracy into more lessons in education.
2. The fact that students who stammer are already disadvantaged by assessment and exam marking schemes that include ‘fluency’ criteria, and that disadvantage is likely to increase if oral assessment becomes a greater part of the curriculum.
3. The lack of visibility and awareness of students who stammer within education and education systems as demonstrated by the frequency with which STAMMA has to support families and university students to access appropriate reasonable adjustments.
4. The way that concepts of ‘fluency’ and ‘good communication’ skills are often conflated within public discourse. For example, in his July 2023 speech focused on oracy in schools, Keir Starmer said that the "inability to articulate your thoughts fluently is a key barrier to getting on and thriving in life": <https://news.sky.com/story/labour-to-propose-annual-ofsted-inspections-in-education-overhaul-12915563>. ‘Fluency’ is not a marker of communicative skill or competence, so it shouldn’t be used as the yardstick by which we either talk about or assess effective communication.

We recognise the significant challenges and difficulties that can be associated with stammering for pupils and students in education. There is often inadequate support in education for those who stammer, and pupils who stammer are at greater risk of bullying than their fluent-speaking peers. This can deter individuals from full participation, can underrate competence and achievements, and is associated with a greater risk of mental health difficulties. It can make the educational experience for those who stammer unnecessarily negative, and reduce confidence in speaking skills rather than increasing it.

STAMMA is currently pressing for best practice in spoken exams to allow those who stammer to show their full potential. Guidance from exam boards related to reasonable adjustments is currently inadequate and ill-suited for students who stammer. Many oral exams include marking criteria related to fluency which rather than assessing knowledge or communicative effectiveness award reward a specific speech characteristic.

The same issues arise with any move for more emphasis on oracy in education: how to facilitate positive speaking experiences for students who stammer, how to prevent bullying, how to adjust typical ways of working so they take into account students who stammer, and how to ensure their knowledge and communication skills are assessed on equal footing with their fluent speaking peers.

An increased focus on oracy within education has the potential to be of benefit for students who stammer through developing confident, verbal communication skills in environments where the same value is placed on stammered speech as on fluent speech. However, without careful thought around the issues outlined above, increased focus on oracy risks creating damaging educational environments for students who stammer.

**1a. What is your understanding of the links between oracy education and specific subject outcomes?**

Many students who stammer are likely to find oral components of education more physically, emotionally and cognitively effortful than their fluent-speaking peers. This can include everyday interactions such as answering the register, answering and asking questions or discussions in class, as well as more ‘formal’ speaking activities such as reading aloud, presenting or taking oral exams. Students who stammer may be at particular risk of high anxiety and stress for long periods prior to speaking activities. Marking schemes in many GCSE and A-Level oral exams include marks awarded for ‘fluency’, yet fluency is not a measure of knowledge, competence or communicative effectiveness. In higher education, there are also negative examples where assessed oral presentations have not been adjusted for those with speech conditions. The move to greater assessed oral presentation has been noted but often this has happened in a naïve manner, with little scaffolding for students who stammer and little understanding of the reasonable adjustments that should be made for those with relevant disabilities. Research also shows that listeners often bring negative and false stereotypes to their interactions with people who stammer. which can directly affect examiner evaluations in oral assessments.

This can affect subject outcomes in multiple ways:

* Students who stammer may avoid certain subjects due to oracy components
* Students who stammer may experience extreme stress around oral participation or assessment if such experiences are not handled sensitively and constructively
* Students who stammer may be less engaged in learning if their focus is consumed by preparing for or worrying about oracy components
* Students who stammer may deal with more social rejection than their fluent-speaking peers
* Students who stammer may be automatically disadvantaged by the fluency criteria component in marking schemes
* Without examiner education, the stigma and false stereotypes that surround stammering can mean that people who stammer are assessed as being ‘less sure’ of their knowledge than their fluent-speaking peers
* Students who stammer may get grades that do not accurately reflect their knowledge and competence

For some students, compulsory oracy elements may have the opposite effect from that intended – rather than helping students find their voice, it may incentivise some to avoid their voice and to disengage from education. Yet those who stammer are no less able. Recognition of this and adjustments can help overcome the barriers for many.

**1b. What evidence and/or examples do you have of this?**

There are multiple, recorded examples of lived experiences where people who stammer describe their experiences around spoken elements of education and assessment, from students fainting with anxiety in oral language exams, to avoiding lessons with oral components, to being mocked and ridiculed by peers and teachers. These aren’t isolated incidents. Here are just a few of the many, many examples of short, personal experiences of stammering at school:

* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/i-learned-sign-language-avoid-speaking>
* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/expect-unexpected>
* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/you-have-so-much-more-contribute>
* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/world-your-stage>
* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/talking-therapy-can-be-barrier>
* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/emotional-toll-stammering-not-understood-enough>
* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/girl-stammer>
* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/holiday-rep-travel-industry-leader>
* <https://stamma.org/your-voice/once-i-found-something-i-loved-talking-about-i-spoke-without-fear>

The Natasha Abrahart case at Bristol is a key case, where a student with social anxiety unfortunately took her own life when the university failed to change the basis of an oral assessment in a large lecture theatre: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-68284323>. The High Court noted the university did not respond in accordance with the 2010 Equality Act.

Indeed, there is evidence that an unscaffolded approach to oral assessment leads to widespread anxiety for many students. Research by Rob Grieve and others at UWE (for example <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1948509>) shows that fears of public speaking can have an overall negative effect on higher education experience. This research suggests that higher education institutions should acknowledge public speaking fear among some students and provide more support in oral presentation assessments.

More generally and worryingly, there is evidence of negative perceptions by teachers across all education levels, who may not always recognise stammering as a condition worthy of respect and support (see the series of POSHA-S studies which continues to grow and which measure international attitudes to stammering amongst the general public, amongst teachers, amongst parents, and amongst Speech & Language Therapists: <https://www.stutteringattitudes.com/Side_Links/posha_references/attitudes.html>, as well as studies such as Werle & Byrd (2021): <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0094730X20300814>). Butler (2013) notes the widespread report by her study participants that teachers could be discriminatory and unsupportive towards students who stammer: (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0883035513000220>).

There is evidence that young children who stammer soon become aware that they speak in a different way from other people (Bernstein Ratner (1997) and that fluent-speaking young children quickly develop negative attitudes to stammered speech (Platzky & Yairi (2001): <https://www.csun.edu/~ainslab/readings/PastLabMembers/Harley/Yairi_Young%20Child-s%20awareness%20of%20stuttering-like%20difluency.pdf>. There is also evidence that schoolchildren who stammer continue to be rejected and subject to more instances of bullying than their peers, for example, see the work of Davis, Howell & Cooke (2002): <https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1469-7610.00093>).

The association between stammering and mental health in terms of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation is documented. Examples include Briley, Gerlach & Jacobs (2021): <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0094730X20300759>; Tichenor, Palasik & Yaruss (2023): <https://pubs.asha.org/doi/abs/10.1044/2023_AJSLP-23-00007> and McAllister, Collier & Shepstone (2013): <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1460-6984.12021>.

With regard to exam board guidance on reasonable adjustments for students who stammer, we take the Joint Council for Qualification’s (JCQ) guidance as an example as this sets out *policy* on guidance. Here is the JCQ’s Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments document: <https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/AA_regs_Revision_One_Sep23_FINAL.pdf>. The guide includes a section on ‘Communication and interaction’ needs, but none of the examples include speech production challenges. Only two of the suggested adjustments are likely to be relevant for students who stammer, and many of the adjustments which are likely to reduce disadvantage for students who stammer are not mentioned (such as examiners receiving information about stammering in advance to reduce examiner bias, or examiners being made aware that a particular student may circumlocute to avoid stammering on particular terminology, or students being allowed to make brief notes before responding verbally to the questions, or being allowed to complete an oral assessment with a familiar examiner or via videolink). One of the two possibly relevant adjustments which the guide does reference is extra time. The guide signposts to a standard 25%, stating that more than 25% and, particularly, more than 50% extra time will only be awarded in the most exceptional of circumstances. Yet needing extra time to speak is not an exceptional circumstance for many students who stammer. It’s normal. And how much extra time varies from person to person. For some it may be just 5% extra time, whilst for others it may be 300%.

Regarding ‘fluency’ being used within exam marking criteria, there are many examples. These include the AQA’s French GCSE which includes marking criteria for ‘spontaneity and fluency’ (<https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/languages/gcse/french-8658/scheme-of-assessment#id>) and Pearson’s French A-level marking criteria (<https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/languages/gcse/french-8658/scheme-of-assessment#id>) which includes a section on ‘Articulate communication’ where communication is required to be *‘fluent, effective and coherent as students control/manipulate the language to express with some ease what they want to say for a number of different purposes.’* Again, we argue that ‘fluency’ is not a marker of communicative skill or competence, so it shouldn’t be used as the yardstick by which we assess effective communication.

**1c. Can you cite any examples of best practice in oracy education?**

Particular resources include the *‘Reasonable adjustments for students who stammer’* guide at the bottom of this webpage: <https://stamma.org/get-help/education/school>, and guidance for primary and secondary school teachers here in creating environments where pupils can feel safe to stammer: <https://stamma.org/about-stammering/guides-non-stammerers/teachers-guide-stammering>. Within higher education, there is the *Supporting Students in Higher Education* guide which was warmly received by the National Association of Disability Practitioners. See the downloadable guide at the bottom of this webpage: <https://stamma.org/get-help/education/college-university>.

The University of West of England (UWE) have run Stand Up and Be Heard workshops to support students in developing confident oral presentation skills. other universities run public speaking groups, such as Toastmasters or standalone public speaking courses and these can be beneficial provided that they are facilitated in ways that accept that stammering is the way some people talk and make space for stammering.

Some flexibility on whether oracy is a compulsory requirement can help – allowing students to opt in / opt out in a low-key way could lead to better oracy outcomes in the medium term. Allowing speaking confidence to grow with gradually expanding comfort zones, in an unforced way can allow some students who stammer to continue engaging both with subjects and with oracy even when it is stressful and frightening. See this short article as a real-life example: <https://stamma.org/your-voice/what-helps-my-covert-stammer-school>.

**2a. What is your understanding of the links between oracy and outcomes in career and business?**

Oracy skills can be significant in terms of the impact on PERCEPTION of competence. Sometimes this may be unwarranted where disfluency is wrongly seen as a sign of uncertainty, lack of knowledge or conflated with poor communication skills. It’s also often interpreted as a sign of particular traits or personality characteristics. None of these are accurate. But this conflation of concepts can have serious outcomes for the careers of people who stammer.

Interviewers commonly (and falsely) assume that candidates who stammer are weak or nervous. There’s also evidence of role entrapment, with people who stammer being regarded as unsuitable for certain job roles, including leadership roles. Furthermore, there’s evidence that people who stammer may choose not to apply for particular jobs because they either feel they will not be welcome, feel they will be at risk of bullying or fear the *interview process* itself.

Interview processes are rarely designed with candidates who stammer in mind. In fact, the set-up of interviews means that many people who stammer will stammer *more* in that setting than they do in their daily life. The need for small talk, time limited meetings, the focus on introductions (difficult as people who stammer often find it hard to say their name on demand), and the lack of understanding of stammering from many interviewers all have an impact on interview outcomes.

For these reasons, separating the concept of fluency from the concepts of oracy and effective communication skills matters. And using language and structures that model this within education can ripple out into the way people who stammer are received in careers and business.

**2b. What evidence and/or examples do you have of this?**

The series of POSHA-S studies which continues to grow demonstrates negative public perceptions towards people who stammer: <https://www.stutteringattitudes.com/Side_Links/posha_references/attitudes.html>.

There are limited population studies but Gerlach *et al*. (2018) found evidence of gendered earnings and employment differentials in an investigation of American labour force data. They suggested that these showed significant discrimination in employment outcomes, particularly for women who stammered compared to women who did not: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29933430/>.

Numerous surveys report people who stammer encountering difficulties in employment (see Gerlach *et al.,* 2018 for a review: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29933430/>). Gabel et al (2021) found evidence of role entrapment for people who stammer, with participants who do not stammer regarding 20 of 43 careers presented as automatically unsuitable for people who stammer: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15026213/>. Research by Butler (2013) indicates that people who stammer face daily, casual discrimination at work; that the normal recruitment process with interviews works against them and that they often do not achieve their potential but instead ‘settle’ for menial jobs with little communication demands: <https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/23886/bsa_stammering_release_agreed_1_.pdf>.

At the same time, there are examples of successful people who stammer in every walk of life. The Stambassadors site at Action for Stammering Children shows people who overtly stammer succeeding across the career spectrum: <https://actionforstammeringchildren.org/get-involved/stambassadors/>.

**3a. What is your understanding of the links between oracy and mental health?**

We cannot comment on the links between oracy and mental health, but we can comment on the links between stammering and mental health. And BECAUSE there is a link between stammering and mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation, it’s essential that students who stammer are considered within oracy education. Oral elements of education can both support students who stammer to develop their skills as confident verbal communicators who stammer, and can expose them to distress, ridicule, anxiety and rejection. Getting it right matters. Stammering can sometimes be associated with mental health difficulties. In some cases, people who stammer can become isolated and depressed.

**3b. What evidence and/or examples do you have of this?**

This link discusses and cites a range of studies on the impact of stammering on mental health / emotional well-being. It discusses mental health, bullying, employment and quality of life. <https://stamma.org/features/consequences-stammering>

There is evidence that schoolchildren who stammer continue to be rejected and subject to more instances of bullying than their peers. See, for example, Davis, Howell & Cooke (2002): <https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1469-7610.00093>.

The association between stammering and mental health in terms of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation is documented. Examples include Briley, Gerlach & Jacobs (2021): <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0094730X20300759>; Tichenor, Palasik & Yaruss (2023): <https://pubs.asha.org/doi/abs/10.1044/2023_AJSLP-23-00007>; and McAllister, Collier & Shepstone (2013): <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1460-6984.12021>.

At the same time, there is a growing affirmative model in the stammering community, focusing on the social model of disability. This points to the fact that people who stammer can be effective, vibrant communicators who thrive in speaking situations and that stammering may bring particular positive traits or experiences. <https://stamma.org/features/what-stammering-pride>.

**4a. What is your understanding of the links between oracy, advocacy and democracy?**

Approaches or environments that regard fluent speech as ‘better’ than other speaking styles are likely to silence or exclude those who speak differently.

We see this within our TV, film and audio media, as well as in the way our political system is run, where people who stammer are rarely given a platform (UNLESS they’re talking about stammering).

**4b. What evidence and/or examples do you have of this?**

Considering the prevalence of stammering within the general population (8% of children stammer and *at least* 1% of adults stammer), the appearance of people who stammer in the media is rare.

In 2021, STAMMA ran a campaign called *‘No Diversity Without Disfluency’* pushing for greater representation of stammering in the media. To see more people who stammer and to hear their spontaneous voices. Not talking about stammering, but present in dramas, quiz shows, debates and discussions. You can read about the campaign here: <https://stamma.org/about-us/campaigns/no-diversity-without-disfluency>. Ofcom, the UK regulatory broadcasting authority, responded by saying, "We applaud the work to raise awareness of stammering and encourage broadcasters to take notice".

There are clear examples of politicians who stammer being silenced or excluded. A recent case is that of a prospective MP who withdrew his candidacy following abuse and mockery of his stammer: <https://stamma.org/news/mp-candidate-withdraws-after-stammering-abuse> (Feb 2024). MP Rosena Allin-Khan has spoken of her concerns that parliament is not an environment where disfluent speech is tolerated or welcomed. And there is footage of former-MP Ed Balls stammering in parliament and being roundly mocked by his peers for doing so. Reviewing parliamentary ways of working we see jeering, interruption and mockery as common aspects of debate effectively silencing those who need more time to space to talk, and we also see procedures such as the *‘Ten Minute Rule Bill’* where time limits restrict those who need longer to speak.

**\*6a. What role do you think government and schools should play in oracy education?**

Ensure that any increased focus on oracy in education does not disadvantage or lead to reduced quality of life for students who stammer.

Ensure that oracy teaching is focused on effective communication, not on fluency.

Push exam boards to improve the guidance around reasonable adjustments for students who speak differently.

**\*6b. Please share one policy that you think would improve oracy education in England.**

Ensure that specific, tailored interventions and adjustments for students who speak differently, incorporating inclusive messages about communication diversity, are routinely incorporated into oracy education.