

# SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO STAMMER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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# Introduction and Acknowledgments

This guide has been produced to provide a toolkit for higher education (HE) professionals when they are supporting students who stammer to achieve a positive and inclusive HE experience. This document should not be seen as a guide to legal rights and obligations, and is not a substitute for getting legal advice.

While 1-3% of the adult population are known to stammer, many HE professionals often have limited experience to draw upon to inform their practice (Johnston and Bashir, 2017).

The impact of stammering on a student's journey is complex due to the significant differences in the way that:

- Individuals stammer and the variable nature of stammering as a speech condition.
- The differences in an individual's own self-perceptions of stammering.
- The differences in the way that stammering can be perceived by others.

Understanding the impact of stammering in higher education requires us to reflect on three things:

- The impact of competing models of disability.
- The key role of partnership working with a student.
- The use of the inclusive practice triangle for supporting students, which Disabled Students Allowance forms part of (see section on Setting Out a Three-Tiered Approach).

This resource is written for the following staff in higher education: Leaders of teaching and learning; Course directors; Disability advisors; and Study skills advisors.

It is intended to help HE staff to:

- Ensure that students who stammer have the support they need to be able to access, remain and succeed within and progress from HE.
- Implement as a minimum the 'reasonable steps' required under the *Equality Act 2010* to make sure that students who stammer are not disadvantaged compared to other students. Within the Northern Ireland context, to ensure that reasonable adjustments are implemented for students with disabilities as defined within the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and required in law under the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005.

While the guidance is written for the UK context, it may have relevance in other university settings. However, it is not intended as legal advice and it should be noted that in some circumstances universities may have greater obligations under the Equality Act.

This resource has been produced by the national organisation, Stamma (formerly the British Stammering Association) and an organisation that focuses on supporting universities, Stammerers Through University Consultancy (STUC). The content (including illustrative case studies that use pseudonyms) has been drawn from these organisations and has also been informed by relevant research evidence. It has been reviewed by experts in HE and in the field of stammering, with special thanks going to Claire Norman, Deborah Johnston, Gillian Rudd, Jo Barlow, Jonathan Thompson, Kirsten Howells, Nicki Martin, Rachel Everard and Rob Grieve.

# Understanding Stammering and Its Link to Learning

## What is Stammering?

The national organisation Stamma describes stammering as:

... when someone repeats, prolongs or gets stuck on sounds or words, often accompanied by some physical tension.

This is experienced over a period of time and is not the same as the occasional disfluencies that fluent speakers may experience. While different terms are used internationally, stammering and stuttering mean the same thing. Most people start stammering in childhood, between the ages of 2 and 5. This is known as developmental stammering. Some people start stammering later on in life.

Most research indicates that up to 1% of the adult population stammers, but some UK surveys suggest up to 3% – that's about 1.5 million people in the UK. In 2018/19, there were 2.38m students in higher education in the UK, suggesting that **there might be between 23,800 and 71,400 students who stammer in the UK.**

No two people stammer in the same way – you'll come across students whose stammering is very noticeable and others where there are very few audible and/or visible signs of stammering. This is known as covert or interiorised stammering.

Any one person's stammering may also vary from day to day in terms of audience perception and their own self-perception of their struggle to speak.

This guide uses the term '**person who stammers' (PWS)** to discuss those who stammer, as, in the UK, this has become the preferred term in stammering community groups. The intention is that people should not be defined by their speech condition, as the term 'stammerer' seems reductionist to many. This terminology is somewhat different to that in the disability community generally (see Wilson and Martin, 2018, for a general discussion of disability language).

## **Causes of Stammering**

The causes of stammering are increasingly being uncovered by research. However, among the general public, there are many widespread misconceptions about the causes of stammering.

Stammering is **not** caused by nervousness. For most, it has a neurological basis – research tells us that the brains of people who stammer are wired slightly differently from those who don't. There are indications from research that there is a genetic link to stammering, which often runs in families – around 60% of people who stammer have a relative who stammers or used to stammer. There is no link between stammering and intelligence – people who stammer have the same levels of intelligence as the general population.

There are no cures for stammering. While most children who start stammering in early childhood will stop stammering either spontaneously or with support from speech and language therapy, for adults, the picture is different. While there needs to be more research, we do know that if someone stammers into adulthood they are likely to continue to stammer for the rest of their lives, although the degree may vary widely. While there is no intervention that will make stammering go away, the Stamma website lists therapies and techniques which may help people to manage their stammer, should they wish to.

## **Impacts of Stammering**

Having a stammer, and other people's reactions to it, can significantly affect the way someone thinks and feels about themselves. It is important to begin by recognising that some people who stammer (PWS) are entirely comfortable stammering, and there is a growing movement of PWS who reject any compulsion to be fluent. However, other people who stammer often report feeling ashamed, frustrated, embarrassed or anxious. This can be linked to the misconceptions of stammering and negative social judgements (discussed below).

Therefore, when working with a student who stammers it is important to consider their individual perceptions and support needs.

For those PWS who are uncomfortable stammering, a common way of coping with stammering is to try to avoid it, out of fear of being judged negatively. A student who stammers might say less than they want to, swap a difficult word for an easier one, avoid situations such as giving presentations, and use fillers ('ums' and 'ers') before a difficult word.

Stammering can sometimes be associated with mental health difficulties. In some cases, PWS can become extremely isolated and depressed.

The impact of stammering in HE will be discussed in more detail through this guide, but an overview is presented here. Every student is different and the extent to which stammering might impact on a person's studies will be unique to them. Generally speaking, many people who stammer find the following speaking situations challenging:

- **Introductions in academic or social situations:** saying your name can be particularly tough if you stammer, as can giving a verbal pen portrait of oneself.
- **Speaking in front of a group in a lecture or seminar:** a challenging situation for lots of people and especially those who stammer, who may be more anxious about being judged and assessed negatively.
- **Using the phone or online teaching approaches that rely on verbal interaction only:** this relies on voice only and some people will struggle to get started, resulting in silence and often unhelpful comments or being hung up on. This is deeply frustrating and hurtful.

It is likely that students who stammer will feel anxious about:

- Admission interviews
- Introduction and 'icebreaker' activities
- Tutorials
- Seminars and lectures
- Presentations
- Oral exams
- Placements

As we will see below, students who stammer might be worried about their choice of course, module, mode of assessment or being included in social networks.

**Case study: Oladayo, third year student**

"When I first started university, I was terrified – not knowing anyone, new place, starting a degree, but I also had my stammer to cope with, a whole extra hurdle. I was most worried about meeting new people."



## Stammering and Models of Disability

The first question that you may have in reading this guide is whether or not stammering is a disability. As we shall see below, there is an active discussion among those who stammer about whether or not they personally regard stammering as a disability.

However, while we navigate through these debates, it is important to remember that stammering **can be considered** to be a disability as defined in the *Equality Act 2010*. In the Act, disability is defined as an impairment that has a substantial adverse effect (defined as not minor) on one's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. One of the examples in the 2011 statutory guidance is of a person who stammers and the related substantial and adverse impact on communication activities. While stammering may not always be shown to be a disability, stammering has also been found to be a disability in many employment tribunal cases. A full review can be found at <https://www.stammeringlaw.org.uk/disability-equality-law/disability/>.

### *Factors that dissuade PWS from disclosing a stammer*

If stammering can be included as a disability in the *Equality Act 2010*, why do so few people who stammer identify as disabled and so few students who stammer make themselves known to university disability advisors? (See discussion on disclosure later in this guide.)

One oft-cited feature among stammering community groups is that stammering is rarely described neatly by the simplifying categories on many disability disclosure forms (i.e. leading such forms to, ironically, prevent disclosure of stammering). There are, however, additional, deeper reasons for the failure to disclose and these stem from the competing approaches to disability and to stammering among the general public and professionals.

Public perceptions of the causes of stammering can include myths that involve negative stereotypes of people who stammer, such as being overly nervous, timid, emotionally unbalanced, shy or introverted (Butler, 2013). Needless to say, there is no foundation for the belief that personality differences cause stammering, but such myths may impact on community perceptions of those who stammer and on the self-perceptions of people who stammer (PWS). Some PWS may falsely blame themselves for their stammer and, akin to the **moral model of disability** (Wilson and Martin, 2018), may see stammering as a personal, private 'failure' or 'inadequacy' rather than a speech condition caused by neurological differences.

In addition, many services (including those in universities) may require a medical diagnosis of a speech condition. This is akin to the operation of a **medical model** of disability (see Wilson and Martin, 2018 for a definition) that suggests that disabled people have discrete, fixed and innate physical or mental differences to non-disabled people. However, many

PWS may never have sought help from their GP or received a diagnosis for a range of reasons:

- PWS may not have approached their GP because they have not thought that help is available and/or because they see stammering as the result of individual 'failings'.
- PWS may have had an unhelpful response from their GP because of erroneous GP understanding of stammering.
- PWS may not have had a GP-related diagnosis because access to NHS speech and language therapy support can vary significantly by location, resulting in long waits and/or limited services (Bercow, 2018; Action for Stammering Children, 2019).
- PWS may have instead sought support from private therapists or therapies (not only speech and language therapy but also CBT, meditation, yoga etc).
- PWS may have gained support from stammering community groups rather than approaching health professionals.

At the same time, there is a growing **affirmative model** in the stammering community. This model recognises that stammering causes speech difference but rejects the notion that such differences *must* be disabling. PWS who take an affirmative approach may point to the fact that there are many successful people in public life who identify as having a stammer, that stammering does not necessarily prevent effective communication and that stammering may bring particular positive traits or experiences. Those within an affirmative approach may adhere to a view that stammering only becomes disabling *when it is allowed* to do so (see Campbell, Constantino and Simpson, 2019; Claypole, 2021). This approach shares many features with the social model of disability (see below) and can lead some PWS to reject the notion of 'disability' because it can be seen to focus on disablement rather than ability.

### *Social model of disability and stammering*

As we noted above, there are many erroneous negative beliefs about stammering, and this can affect interaction in the classroom, at work and in work placements, and during social events. The impact of this is important when we use a social model of disability – as many of the barriers faced by those who stammer arise not only from their own self-beliefs but also from the expectations and views of those around them.

The social model of disability proposes that disabled people are people with impairments who are disabled by their environment (Butler, 2013). In this subsection, we review evidence for education settings that suggests that the reaction of people who do not stammer can be disabling for those who do.

Butler (2013) suggests that the disabling effect of the learning environment for many people who stammer can lead to chronic social exclusion. This results in dissatisfaction and 'lost opportunities' in relation to social interactions and academic engagement and achievements (Meredith and Packman, 2015).

Why does the reaction of others lead to a disabling effect? There is substantial evidence that stammered speech can cause discomfort in listeners (Guntupalli *et al.*, 2007). At the same time, evidence shows a lack of understanding about the causes of stammering (Craig, Tran and Craig, 2003).

There is a small but significant set of data on the negative perceptions of people who stammer by higher education students (Silverman and Paynter, 1990; Dorsey and Guenther, 2000; Betz, Blood and Blood, 2008). This sense of stigma can lead to a range of problems in university. There may be problems for those who stammer engaging in group work because of the perceptions of others. A range of studies of school or university settings have shown that young people who stammer might be rejected or isolated from social groups by those who don't stammer (Davis, Howell and Cooke, 2002; Boyle, Blood and Blood, 2009; Butler, 2013)

More worryingly, there is some evidence of negative perceptions by teachers across all education levels, who may not always recognise stammering as a condition worthy of respect and support. Butler (2013) notes the widespread report by her study participants that teachers refused to be supportive.

*Participants reported that the behaviour of teachers varied between those who would purposefully taunt them, ignore a request for differing treatment, through to those who physically excluded them to the back of the class ... These experiences had a direct and detrimental impact on participants' learning experience; educational achievement; and their subsequent 'choice' of whether to move onto higher education.*

Source: (Butler, 2013)

Similarly, in an autoethnography, Isaacs (2020) reports on the way that time pressure and inadequate understanding led university lecturers, library staff and advisors to act as an obstacle to his postgraduate opportunities.

### **Key Takeaways**

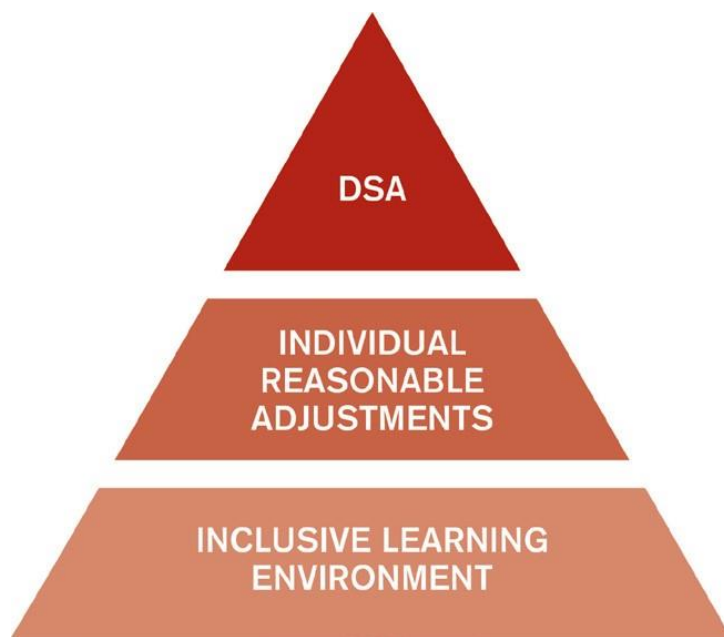
The impact of stammering in university will be diverse. Many students who stammer will be able to successfully negotiate their university experience, while others will experience lasting barriers that may undermine the transformative experience of higher education.

While many students who stammer will not identify as disabled, they may yet experience disadvantage related to their speech condition. It is important for HE professionals to use the social model of disability to understand how impacts occur and to work in partnership with students to understand how best to mitigate these impacts so that they can fully benefit from the learning and social opportunities on offer.

# Setting Out a Three-Tiered Approach to Student Support

## Introduction to Inclusive Learning and the Three-Tiered Approach

Inclusive learning refers to the way that teaching and learning materials and approaches are designed and delivered to engage all students (Hockings, 2010). HE providers are required to offer an inclusive learning experience to all students, based around a social model of disability. The Department for Education (DfE, 2017) have proposed a model to show how HE providers should structure their support for disabled students (Fig 1.).



**Figure 1:** Supporting disabled students in HE (source: DfE, 2017)

This three-tiered approach will be explained in this section and used as a lens through the rest of this document to understand how students who stammer can be supported through their higher education journey. This document should not be seen as a guide to legal rights and obligations, and is not a substitute for getting legal advice. For example, universities may on occasion have greater obligations under equality legislation than what is stated in this guide and each case should be assessed separately.

## A Short Guide to the Three-Tiered Approach

- An 'inclusive' learning environment should be the foundation of the support for disabled students in HE. This means that many barriers that disabled students might otherwise have faced are addressed through the core design of the teaching and learning. Institutions might develop an inclusive environment in a range of ways. They may assess themselves against a check list of accessibility features (Department for Education, 2017) or might adopt a more fundamental universal design for learning approach (Martin, 2020). Further guidance on inclusive practice and stammering is set out below.
- The model does, however, recognise that not all barriers can be removed through an inclusive approach, and in certain situations it will be necessary to make individual reasonable adjustments, such as allowing written assessments rather than oral presentations. (Further guidance on individual reasonable adjustments are provided in later sections.) The *Equality Act 2010* places a duty on HE providers to take an anticipatory approach: adjustments should be proactive, not reactive. HE providers should consider in advance the barriers that a student is likely to face and make anticipatory adjustments for them. Feedback from focus groups and students who stammer demonstrates that failure to do so can have a wide range of consequences.
- Finally, in situations where a student may require specialist support and equipment, the government provides funding through the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA). Guidance about DSA should be provided by all HE institutions: <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas>. If the student wishes, DSA might be used to access speech therapy or related resources and equipment. Further guidance on the potential use of DSA is found below.

Often DSA assessments are conducted by assessors who do not have specialist knowledge of the range of support available for students who stammer. Disability staff in HE should consider directing students to either DSA assessors with a specialist knowledge of stammering, or DSA assessors who have an established working relationship with the HE provider in finding the best possible outcome for the student.

DSA assessors can look at the Stamma website (<https://stamma.org/>) or contact the organisation at [help@stamma.org](mailto:help@stamma.org) for information. Students should be encouraged to apply for DSA at the earliest possible opportunity to ensure that they have the equipment and support that they require in place for the start of the academic year.

### **Case study: Failure of reactive adjustments**

Emma identifies as having a very noticeable stammer. When she started in the first year of her Sociology course, she was unable to obtain a detailed module description and had not been aware that she was required to take part in a group presentation that accounted for 100% of her marks on a core module.

When she was placed in a group, the rules were that each group member had to contribute to the oral presentation. Emma was deeply uncomfortable and approached student learning services, but they only provided information on presentation skills. Emma approached her module leader, who had not advised a student who stammered before. He could see that she was very anxious and inappropriately recommended that she relax and take deep breaths.

Emma then turned to her course director who referred her to student wellbeing services, and they realised that she needed reasonable adjustments. By then, however, the presentation day had passed, and Emma's group had had to present without her. Her relationships with them had broken down as they felt that she had not fulfilled her part.

Disability services suggested reasonable adjustments and that Emma should be allowed to present her work in an alternative format. However, Emma had missed the university assessment window and had to come back for resits. She felt frustrated at not being able to progress as planned. She was embarrassed and worried that many in her year group now disliked her. Overall, the experience increased her feeling of isolation, something which is shown to be extremely common for students who stammer.

### **Working in Partnership**

Inclusive education should be seen as a progressive partnership between the institution, its staff, students and other stakeholders (QAA, 2015; OIA, 2017).

It is likely that a student who stammers may require varied support over time. In this way, all parties learn together about what types of adjustments work best.

Students who stammer may find that their fluency and the impact of stammering can increase or decrease as external events change. So, for example, while stress does not cause stammering, it can exacerbate it and a student might find that activities that were once feasible may at other times become more daunting. Similarly, a student may also find that supportive work on their self-perception, the attitudes and responses of those around them or their speech may encourage them to tackle previously challenging activities.

It is important that staff provide opportunities for the student to express their perception of how support is working. A key staff member and the student could have regular meetings or written communication. This investment of time at defined intervals in the academic year can improve student outcomes.

**Case study: Working in partnership**

David is studying Photography and has a productive relationship with his academic advisor, who he first met at the university insight day for applicants. David had told his advisor that he stammered and so his tutor was able to go to the Stamma website to learn more. His advisor met him as he enrolled in September, just to talk through what the issues were for him, and then how they would deal with them. On David's course there is an expectation that you see your academic advisor once each term. David found that his self-esteem and ability to engage in class discussion was quite fluid, and the meetings with his advisor helped him reflect on which approaches were working best.

**Key Takeaways**

Given the complexity and variation of stammering, the adoption of the three-tiered approach to inclusion will be important for students who stammer.

Many PWS will find their needs met by an inclusive learning environment with built-in flexibility, while others might benefit from reasonable adjustments. Some PWS may wish to access the Disabled Students Allowance to make use of specialist equipment or support.

In all cases, where students reach out for support, it will be important to work in partnership, with regular meetings to reflect on the student's experience of support and adjustments.

# Moving Into Higher Education

Research evidence suggests that often people who stammer may have a range of obstacles when moving to higher education (Butler, 2013).

Butler (2013) argues that many students who stammer may not have achieved their academic potential and may not have the qualifications for entrance to higher education. Furthermore, many may be dissuaded from attending university due to their experience at school. Of the participants in her study who went to university, Butler (2013) notes that students tended to be isolated and did not disclose their stammer on their admission form or to anyone within the university. This accords with other research that suggests that disabled students with unseen disabilities experience the greatest challenges in UK universities (Richardson, 2009).

In the introductory section, we looked at the reasons why PWS may not disclose a speech condition, such as not regarding their stammer a disability, or because they did not believe that much could be done to assist them. In addition, it should be noted that some applicants who stammer may believe that that they would not receive a place if they do disclose (for a general discussion for disabled students, see Vickerman and Blundell, 2010).

## **Transition from Compulsory Education to Higher Education**

During compulsory education within the UK, it is likely that there is:

- Uneven access to support and information – so the tools and information that students have might be unclear, and they may not know what will work for them in terms of reasonable adjustments.
- Exposure to the myths around stammering – so students may have poor self-belief or negative self-image, and may not feel able to advocate positively for themselves.
- Isolation – some students will not have been able to discuss stammering previously and may be uncomfortable talking about stammering with their close friends and family, let alone talking to a disability advisor.
- Low expectations of support – students may have had little support in school even where they requested it and may not see lecturers or staff as potential allies.
- Problem solving and negotiation skills – while the list above suggests a range of negative impacts of stammering, students may also have had to develop strong



problem-solving skills and considerable experience of navigating and negotiating the obstacles they face.

### **Impact on University and Course Choice**

There is some evidence that having a stammer impacts on the ability to benefit from a university education. In focus groups carried out by the Stammerers Through University Consultancy (STUC) in multiple UK university settings, participants said that they were hindered by:

- An inability to ask questions or clarify learning points in certain settings.
- Choosing modules that would not involve speaking or interaction even when these did not meet their learning goals.
- Choosing courses that would not involve speaking or interaction even when these did not meet their long-term career goals.
- Not being ready to disclose their stammer to the university's or college's Student Support or Disability Services (or whichever group the HE institution has for this purpose).

It is important for disabled learners to have sufficient information to help them with choosing an institution and a course. Providers can facilitate this through:

- Stamma material or similar, to encourage people who stammer to be more comfortable talking about their stammer and/or become aware they can access DSA and other forms of support.
- Ensuring that all information such as prospectuses are available in advance so that individuals develop a better understanding of their prospective course. A challenge for students who stammer is anticipating the type of support they may need to engage in group activities or oral presentations.
- Provision of information about the styles of teaching, learning and assessment on a course – and the use of technology such as Padlet or similar (see below).
- An understanding of the additional supporting services available in university such as Disabled Students Allowance.

### **Case study: Selecting a course**

Shannon has a stammer and she is hoping to study Journalism. She is concerned about being placed at a disadvantage if she selects a course that has a strong focus on assessed oral presentations. Although she achieved good A level grades, Shannon worries that HE might not be for her as she had a poor experience with one of her subjects at school, English. Shannon has always enjoyed writing but felt traumatised by negative judgements after having to read out loud in English class over several years. She does not want to be put at a disadvantage in getting good marks on her course, nor does she want to deal with negative comments from others. As she isn't sure what role presentation might play in her course, Shannon at times considers changing her course choice, or even not attending university at all.

Open days are an important opportunity for all students, but for students who stammer, they can form a critical part of their experience of transitioning into HE:

- They can offer an opportunity for the student to meet key people, such as lecturers, staff working in learning support and welfare tutors, to learn more about the course and the institution and how it can best suit them.
- They can alert students to the potential for support and particularly for Disabled Students Allowance. Should the student wish to use this kind of support (see below for examples), it can take time to put in place and the gold standard is having support in place pre-entry.

### **Case study: Attending an open day**

Julian is attending an open day at a university that he is interested in. He wants to study Engineering but wants to ensure that his course will allow him to go on to a specialist Masters. The course briefing does not provide the information and, although there is a long question and answer session, it is in front of a large group in a lecture theatre and Julian feels that he can't ask the questions he wants to. The lecturer leaves immediately afterwards and the written material does not answer his question. Fortunately Julian has been allocated to a building tour with a student who is currently taking the course he is interested in. Julian feels able to ask his question in the smaller tour group. The student not only answers Julian's question, she also shares the lecturer's email address so that Julian can follow up directly with any further questions.

Examples of more inclusive open day approaches:

- Use name labels for visitors so they don't need to say their name and course that they are interested in.

- Consider whether briefings provide multiple approaches for applicants to ask questions. Provide alternatives to live Q&As in large lecture halls, such as the use of supportive technology (e.g. Padlet, Poll Everywhere or other technology that allows electronic Q&A), email routes, comment cards, small group sessions etc.

## **Selection Process**

In accordance with the *Equality Act 2010*, education providers must not discriminate against disabled students, including at the point of admission. The provider has a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that a disabled student is not put at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

During the selection process this may include offering to make reasonable adjustments for interviews and assessments. If adjustments are not in place, students may keep their answers short because they don't want their stammer to be heard or are concerned that stammering may prejudice the assessor. Telephone interviews might be particularly challenging for people who stammer.

Examples of reasonable adjustments to selection interviews or presentations:

- Give extra time or remove time deadlines for oral presentations – or remove the need for an oral presentation.
- Allow written responses to be considered alongside verbal responses to questions.
- Allow the candidate to use assistive technology if they would want to do so to carry out a presentation.
- Offer a face-to-face interview (whether online or in person) rather than a telephone interview.

## **Disclosure and Disabled Student Allowance**

Stammering can be classified as a disability under the *Equality Act 2010*. This places a legal obligation on schools, further and higher education, and qualification bodies to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled students are not at a substantial disadvantage to their peers. See the next section for examples of reasonable adjustments you can offer. This sub-section considers the issues of timing for early disability disclosure and application for DSA.

For all disabled students, early disclosure is beneficial as it allows for three important responses:

- Planning by the disability team for student support across their university experience.
- Early notification to course leaders and module convenors so that they can more easily accommodate adjustments in an effective and timely way.
- To allow an application for Disabled Students Allowance (see next section for more detail) to provide for the timely receipt of additional technology or support.

In general, disclosure of a disability can be problematic for applicants for several reasons. There may be distrust that disclosure at the application stage may disadvantage, while disclosure also requires applicants to make public elements of their lives that had previously been private or may seem an inappropriate framing of a speech condition that has changeable and fluid impacts (Pearson and Boskovich, 2019).

In the earlier section we noted that both published research and STUC focus groups found that very few students who stammer disclosed it to their university or college via the relevant channels. There are several reasons:

- Students who stammer may not regard themselves as having a disability (Meredith, 2019).
- Students do not understand the type of support which is available and/or do not believe that useful help is available.
- If a student's stammer is not very prominent, they may be unsure whether or not it will pose a significant barrier to their studies and, therefore, may not feel it is worth disclosing.

During open days and the application process, staff should encourage students who stammer to disclose their stammer, in order to facilitate early conversations about appropriate adjustment and support. One example is to pose the question: 'Is there anything else you'd like us to know about you or your circumstances that might help us to support your learning, or your experience at university more generally?'

# Inclusive Teaching and Learning Practice and Reasonable Adjustments

In focus groups carried out by the Stammerers Through University Consultancy (STUC) in multiple UK university settings, it was found that students who stammer often find they are hindered by:

- An inability to ask questions or clarify learning points in certain settings.
- Not being given enough time to speak by lecturers or peers.
- Deciding not to attend situations such as seminars or lectures if there was a pressure to speak.
- Deciding not to engage in oral presentations which might put their speech in the spotlight, even if they were assessed presentations.
- Avoiding group work because of concern about negative judgement.

## Adjustments to Teaching Sessions

Teaching sessions can present barriers for students who stammer. This is particularly true if the lecturer likes to use spot questions to test a student's memorisation or knowledge of key facts.

- In such cases, students who stammer may become withdrawn and not contribute to sessions as much as they want to.
- Students may avoid modules that interest them, due to an engagement pattern that relies on verbal fluency.
- Some students may resort to circumlocution, talking around the subject, so that meaning is hard to discern. Others may offer an inappropriate monosyllabic reply, rather than expanding their responses or explanation.

**With Covid-19**, the use of virtual learning environments can be helpful if new methods of engagement are provided. However, if they are not, students who stammer may find themselves under greater pressure as the communication usually provided by body language will be limited, and there may be an even greater spotlight on verbal performance.

To ensure effective inclusive practice, lecturers should seek to:

- Use a positive inclusion statement at the start of the module that indicates varied communication styles are appreciated and students must treat each other with respect. Frequently remind students of the ground rules in the lecture, such as ‘Give everyone the opportunity to contribute’; ‘Give each person time to say what they want’; ‘Respect differences’ etc.
- Attend training to learn about stammering, how it manifests itself and how it can impact people.
- Give students the option to use other ways of communicating, if they so wish, such as written responses and use of diagrams.
- Use technology, such as *Padlet*, to encourage student participation in a manner which does not discourage them, or trigger anxiety.
- If using virtual learning environments, use breakout rooms, the chat function and polls.
- Avoid spot questioning.
- Allow more time for thinking.
- Allow more time for discussion to ease the demand for ‘instant’ participation.
- Model patience and reduce time pressure.
- Make it clear not everyone has to have a turn – it’s OK to ‘pass’.

#### **Case study: Engaging in lectures**

Nazrin has a stammer and is studying Economics. On her core module, the lecturer likes to encourage engagement in the large lecture hall and, recognising that this can be difficult for many students, she spent time at the start of the module being explicit about the class being a safe space to contribute and wanting to hear a diverse range of voices. This made Nazrin feel more comfortable contributing but she spoke to her lecturer about times it felt hard to do this in the moment due to the worry that she would take too long to ask questions. Her lecturer then introduced Padlet, a tool for electronic engagement that students could use to ask questions throughout the session, thereby improving the experience for everyone.

#### **Tutorials and Group Work**

The objective for HE providers should be to create a learning environment in which students who stammer can demonstrate they have met the learning objectives **without having disfluency count against them** either directly because of assessed oral presentation or indirectly due to social distance with peers.

Given the oral presentation and/or group work that is increasingly common in many HE subjects, this section outlines some examples of good practice and reasonable adjustments that an HE provider may make, including suggesting ways in which students who stammer may benefit.

Students who stammer may fear speaking in front of a large group and may be reluctant to contribute their opinion or read out their work. It is important for lecturers to remember that we need to use a social model of disability to understand that the impact of stammering in tutorials or in group work arises **both because of the feelings of those who stammer and the reactions of those who are fluent:**

- Social dynamics with peer groups can be challenging.
- There may be anxiety about participation in tutorials and socially.
- Verbal participation and group participation may be limited.
- Students may be unsure how their stammer is perceived.

Reasonable adjustments:

Work with the student to select one or more of the options below:

- Vary the size of the group during tutorials.
- Use pair work and small groups.
- If everyone is expected to contribute, agree with the student on the best way for them to do so.
- Give extra time for contributions.
- Delegate specific roles in collaborative projects that allow students to use their preferred communication channel: oral; written; photographic etc.
- Give students specific roles within group tasks – rotate these so everyone gets an opportunity to speak.
- Encourage differentiation, such as one on one discussions, or put people into groups where the student who stammers is comfortable around peers.
- If running seminars in a virtual learning environment, allow for use of chat function, breakout rooms and polls, to take the focus off oral communication.

### **Accessible Assessment Methods and Learning Objectives**

When considering reasonable adjustments which may enable a student who stammers to fully participate in a course or a module, it is always important to review the intended learning objectives. These will be stated in the module and course descriptions upon which a course was validated.

- In turn, these may be drawn from QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, which are used as, non-statutory, reference points in the design, delivery and review of academic programmes.
- Some courses will be accredited by Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) and such courses will provide a route through to certain professions or are recognised by employers. PSRBs will approve courses and consider if they meet the standards required by a profession.

Overall, both Subject Benchmark Statements and PSRB regulations usually establish competence standards which establish if students have a particular essential competence or ability essential to the completion of a course of study. In general, universities cannot make reasonable adjustments about a competence standard, but can make adjustments to the way a standard is assessed.

Many of the barriers to access faced by students who stammer can be addressed by considering how and why verbal interaction is used in teaching, learning or assessment. Students who stammer may be particularly disadvantaged if presentations are assessed as part of assessments. Disfluency may be incorrectly viewed as reflecting lack of knowledge or uncertainty by people who don't stammer. Conversely, fluency may be conflated with confidence and depth of understanding. Some staff may unwittingly find that their marks are influenced by the fluency of a presentation, **even when fluency is not one of the learning objectives** of a course.

It may be that accessible engagement and assessment methods need to be arranged in collaboration with the Student Support or Disability Services (or whichever group the HE institution has for this purpose) and the Faculty or Department. This is where disability disclosure can really help kickstart this process. Therefore, it is also paramount that staff in Student or Disability Support Services are sufficiently educated on stammering, how it manifests itself and how it can impact an individual, particularly in the university setting.

#### **Case study: Review of learning objectives**

Duncan is studying a History module which normally requires that the student present their findings to the year group. However, his experience of stammering has left him with a deep anxiety about public speaking. The learning objectives for the module centre round understanding the debates about the breakdown of feudalism in English medieval history and, after speaking to Duncan, the module leader reflects that the learning objectives are not about developing a knowledge of public speaking. The module leader considers that there are other ways for Duncan to demonstrate his knowledge. The module leader speaks to the Disability Team and the faculty learning and teaching lead to gain approval for changes to the whole class so that Duncan is not singled out and that other students who are concerned about public speaking are not disadvantaged. The module leader provides the following options:

- A class presentation.
- A recorded presentation.
- An academic poster.
- A short reaction paper reviewing the contribution to the debate of three main texts.

Reasonable adjustments:

Review assessment criteria so that, where possible, concepts relating to 'fluency' are replaced with 'effective communication' that focuses on the ability to convey thoughts and



ideas logically. Remove any language from assessment and grading criteria which emphasises the need for 'fluency' or 'lack of hesitation', et cetera.

Consider how the act of presenting relates to module or course learning outcomes and to any competency standards, and consider if alternatives to assessing outcomes and standards can be discussed with the student concerned:

- Choose another assessment method, such as a paper, a poster or a diagram.
- Offer the option to co-present with a peer.
- Allow written scripts for presentations to be considered instead of or alongside verbal presentations.
- Provide extra time.
- Give the opportunity to practise or to present in front of smaller groups.
- Provide the option to give a presentation in a less formal way (e.g. sitting down around a table instead of standing up in front of a group).
- Use audio-visual aids to take the focus off the person.
- Allow them to record or video their presentation in private to show later on to their seminar group.

### **Use of the DSA**

The discussion above strongly suggests that course directors and module leaders should review both engagement approaches and assessment criteria that relate to 'fluency' in the sense of 'lack of hesitation'. Unless verbal fluency is genuinely an objective of the programme, course and module learning outcomes and assessment criteria should instead refer to 'effective communication'. This allows for appropriate assessment of the content and for alternative modes of assessment or presentation.

While many students may not, some students who stammer may find it useful to use the Disabled Students Allowance in order to access:

- Speech and language therapy, where they wish to use the tools and techniques that this provides. Note that speech and language therapy should not be assumed to be appropriate or insisted on. Therapists should be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council.
- The purchase of equipment, such as an electronic fluency device. Electronic fluency devices (also known as altered auditory feedback devices and altered feedback devices) are electronic devices intended to improve the fluency of people who stammer. Most electronic fluency devices change the sound of the user's voice in their ear. There is limited research on the effectiveness of these devices and results are mixed. Such devices should not be assumed to be appropriate or forced on a student.
- To arrange public speaking training in order to desensitise and provide new skills for students who wish to engage in this way.

## **A Special Note on Studying a Language/Languages**

The recommendations and reasonable adjustments mentioned above should be emphasised for those studying languages, where onus is placed on the 'fluency' of an individual's speaking.

Many students who stammer successfully complete language degrees. STUC has found that the experience is varied, with some students stammering more in their mother tongue than their degree language(s) and others vice versa. Miller (2017) researched approaches to language learning among people who stammer. He found that while some people who stammer were dissuaded from language learning due to prior negative experiences, others found that their experience of stammering had given them effective approaches that helped language acquisition.

A general concern in a university context is the potential for stammering (particularly blocking) to be misconstrued by examiners as an inability to recall vocabulary and/or vocalise a language well.

In an oral assessment scenario, this can often result in unfair penalisation in being marked down, which will impact the overall degree result. In such cases the discussion above on assessment and learning objectives should be carefully considered. It should be remembered that language proficiency and fluency are not equivalent – stammering exists globally implying that people manage to both stammer and be fully proficient in every language!

The study of languages is likely to include teaching and assessment practices that are particularly disadvantageous for students who stammer, and these should be considered in the light of learning outcomes and competence standards:

- The use of spot questioning to test recall can be substituted with other approaches to testing vocabulary such as written tests, or be lessened in its impact by creating a positive environment, giving extra time or doing spot testing in smaller groups or one to one.
- The use of assessed oral work to test accent and grammar can be substituted either with other approaches (such as testing grammar through written tests) or, where oral assessment is seen as central to assessing competence standards, by allowing other forms of oral assessment, such as one to one tests, smaller groups, extra time etc.

# Student Experience and Wider Interactions

## Social and Leisure Opportunities

While many students who stammer find social interactions straightforward, others may find them worrying (due to past experience of negative responses).

Where courses are providing co-curricular social events, consider the following:

- Using name labels so students don't need to say their name (many PWS find that verbalising their name can put a high-stakes spotlight on their fluency).
- Use pair work introductions, where they introduce the person they've been talking to and vice versa.
- Setting out ground rules about acceptance of others, modelling inclusive behaviour and making clear that bullying has serious consequences.

Other social events will be organised independently by the Students' Union and others. Having opportunities to join societies and other interest groups is an important part of the overall higher education experience. Not only does it provide an opportunity for students to meet peers with shared interests, it can lead to the development of important skills and experiences that the student can then reference when seeking employment.

Often students who stammer can feel restricted in accessing these activities for a variety of reasons, including students leading the societies and groups not knowing how to relate to a student with a stammer. To help facilitate access to these groups, HE providers and student unions should consider:

- Facilitating students' groups to make reasonable adjustments for students.
- Societies and groups each having an Accessibility Officer or Equal Opportunities Officer on the Executive Committee, to ensure that their activities are inclusive.
- Displaying Stamma/British Stammering Association posters to create a conducive environment and to educate those who do not stammer.

## **Study Abroad and Work Opportunities**

Students who stammer should be encouraged to take opportunities to study or work abroad, if they wish to do so. It is important to note that perceptions of stammering and associated stigma can vary between cultures, countries and institutions.

Course directors and/or disability staff should liaise with the host institution or workplace to facilitate the transition into the overseas location and to ensure that relevant adjustments are made in advance.

### **Case study: Study abroad opportunities**

Nizam studied Languages in HE. As part of this course, it was expected that he would study abroad for a year. He was concerned about travel to the country in question as he had heard they use pejorative terms for those who stammer. He spoke to his course director who had good contacts with Nizam's placement university. With Nizam's permission, she was able to share some information in advance about his concerns and his preferred working styles. With an awareness by the placement university's course team, Nizam felt more at ease. Within a few weeks, he was able to sit down with his placement lead and discuss attitudes to stammering locally. Nizam saw that troubling attitudes had been changing in the last few years, and he also developed some good vocabulary that would suit him when responding to issues or questions about his speech. Overall the close communication between his UK course team and his placement team helped Nizam find approaches and techniques that supported him in having a great year abroad experience.

## Supporting the Transition to Employment

Research shows that disabled students have poorer employment outcomes compared to their peers without disabilities. HE providers have a responsibility to support all students into, within and from their institution.

Numerous surveys with people who stammer report encountering difficulties in employment (see Gerlach *et al.*, 2018 for a review). 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.

At the same time, there are examples of successful PWS in every walk of life. The present President of the USA (Joe Biden) is a person who stammers, and, for example, those who stammer can be found among successful business people, actors, artists, teachers, health care professionals and sports people.

It is important that careers professionals do not inadvertently assume that PWS are limited in their employment options. To widen their perspectives, careers professional may wish to look at various sites that promote positive role models for PWS, such as the Stambassadors site at Action for Stammering Children (<https://actionforstammeringchildren.org/get-involved/stambassadors/>).

Careers advisors should advise students who stammer about Access to Work, which is a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help more disabled people start or stay in work. It can provide practical and financial support if you have a disability or long-term physical or mental health condition. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-factsheet>). An Access to Work grant can pay for practical support to: start working; stay in work; and move into self-employment or start a business. Access to Work scheme is not well known among disabled students or in academia (Martin, 2017; Brown and Leigh, 2018).

As well as providing the standard support offered to students, careers services should offer specific guidance to students who stammer, including:

- Advice on how to disclose the stammering or declare their disability, if the individual wishes to consider doing so.
- Information on support that the student might draw upon in the workplace.
- Advice on how to request reasonable adjustments for interviews and assessments.
- Advice on how best to approach discussing reasonable adjustments that an employer might make for them in the workplace.

It is generally assumed that it is important for students to have previous work experience to enable them successfully to find employment upon graduation. To improve long-term outcomes, careers services should encourage students who stammer to look for suitable summer work placements or voluntary opportunities and support them as they apply for these opportunities.

Stamma offers support on stammering in the workplace and lists many sectors that have specialist networks for those who stammer (<https://stamma.org/>).

### **Work Placements**

Some students take courses which incorporate year-long work placements. Students should be supported with finding a placement and in overcoming challenges that they might face because of their stammering. These include placements of all kinds: teaching, health professionals, study placements, et cetera.

As discussed above, this could include guidance on declaring their stammering and discussing reasonable adjustments. Stamma offers support on stammering in the workplace (<https://stamma.org/>).

# Summary of Key Points and Recommendations

## Key Points

- Stammering varies between people and can vary from moment to moment. Everyone who stammers is different and may have varied feelings about their stammer.
- The basis for stammering is neurological and many of the publicly accepted views of stammering are incorrect (e.g. that it is a sign of nerves).
- The reactions of others both in the past and present will impact on the way that PWS view themselves and their communication skills. Some PWS may not want support and may be comfortable with their speech difference.
- Even where stammering does lead to barriers to learning, some PWS may feel uncomfortable disclosing a disability for a range of reasons. However, stammering can be defined as a disability by *the Equality Act 2010*.
- Currently, PWS rarely disclose a disability when joining university and so may miss out on both reasonable adjustments or DSA-funded services. Course staff, year tutors, student support advisors and study skills teams are likely to be the first point of contact for students who stammer if they do reach out.
- There should never be expectations on a student who stammers to speak fluently or to change the way they talk. If the student wants to access therapy services or assistive technology, that is their choice. It is an option, not an imperative.

## Recommendations

- HE institutions should develop an inclusive environment to enable disabled students, including students who stammer, to engage positively, minimising the need for individual adjustments.
- HE institutions should support students through individual reasonable adjustments in situations where it is not possible to overcome barriers through inclusive practice. It is important that they focus on anticipating issues rather than responding after a problem has been encountered.

- HE institutions should view students as individuals and consider their preferred individual support needs. HE institutions should keep the student at the centre of any discussions on adjustments or support arrangements.
- HE institutions should provide students who stammer with tailored support to prepare them for making the transition into employment, including advice on disclosure of a disability, information on employment rights and support, such as Access to Work.
- HE institutions need to be proactive in creating and advertising support as students who stammer may be less likely to present to disability services without this.
- HE institutions need to provide a supportive communication environment for students who stammer where their contributions are valued regardless of whether they are stammered or spoken fluently.
- Course directors, module leaders and quality-related staff need to carefully consider how 'fluency' (in the form of hesitation-free speech) relates to teaching, learning and assessment methods. They should consider referring to 'effective communication' in learning outcomes or assessment criteria, and rethink how and why assessed oral presentations should be used.

Finally, it should be noted this document is intended to inform those working in HE and set out new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that do not put students who stammer at a disadvantage. It should not be seen as a guide to legal rights and obligations, and is not a substitute for getting legal advice where necessary.



# Organisations for Further Information and Other Resources

## Further Information:

### **Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)**

RCSLT is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK; providing leadership and setting professional standards. They facilitate and promote research into the field of speech and language therapy, promote better education and training of speech and language therapists and provide information for speech and language therapists and the public about speech and language therapy.

Website: [www.rcslt.org](http://www.rcslt.org)

Twitter: @RCSLT

### **Stamma (The British Stammering Association)**

A registered charity that aims to support anyone who stammers in the UK and tackle the stigma, ignorance and discrimination that people who stammer often face so that they can live their life in full and with dignity. Stamma provides information, resources and support to those who stammer, as well as to those close to them such as family, friends, educators, employers and colleagues.

Website: [www.stamma.org](http://www.stamma.org)

Twitter: @stammer

### **Stammeringlaw**

Created by Allan Tyrer, a retired solicitor, the Stammeringlaw website explores the position of stammering under the Equality Act 2010 (previously the Disability Discrimination Act 1995). The website is written mainly from the point of view of the person who stammers (or their adviser) looking into their rights under the Equality Act. However employers and service providers dealing with people who stammer may also find it useful and there is some content specifically for them.

Website: [www.stammeringlaw.org.uk](http://www.stammeringlaw.org.uk)

**Stammerers Through University Consultancy (STUC)** Stammerers Through University Consultancy (STUC) is the world's only initiative which solely aims to support student and staff in higher education who stammer. Founded by Claire Norman in 2014 as a result of her own experiences, STUC endeavours to ensure those who stammer in high education are not disadvantaged and can reach their full potential, no matter what their role.

Website: [www.stuc-uk.org](http://www.stuc-uk.org)

Twitter: @STUC\_UK

#### **Other Resources:**

##### **50 Million Voices**

50 Million Voices is an ambitious global initiative seeking to transform the world of work for people who stutter – and for employers and society too. The raise awareness of the benefits of stammering friendly cultures, highlighting how the whole team benefits when stammering voices are heard. Activities are wide-ranging and include practice interview days, best-practice recruitment workshops and mentoring for employees who stutter.

Website: <https://www.50millionvoices.org/>

Twitter: 50MillionVoices

##### **Stambassadors**

Stambassadors connects people from the world of work who stammer with young people who stammer, sharing their stories and inspiring young people to think big when they are considering their career choices. The Stambassadors website features videos of individuals who stammer sharing their experiences of working in a wide range of sectors and roles, including education, law, health, politics and media.

Website: <https://actionforstammeringchildren.org/get-involved/stambassadors/>

##### **StutterTalk**

StutterTalk is an American non-profit organisation dedicated to talking openly about stuttering and the home of the first and longest running podcast on stuttering. Since 2007 they have published more than 700 podcasts which are heard in 180 countries on wide-ranging topics including societal attitudes, education, discrimination and therapy.

Website: <https://stuttertalk.com/>

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