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OPINION PIECE

Enhancing inclusivity for stammering in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Support for stammering is poorly communicated and implemented in higher education. Recommendations from organisations such as STAMMA can be adopted by universities to enhance visibility and support. This support must continue to evolve as instructional and workplace practices change. An account of where to focus research efforts is presented with an emphasis on the relatively recent enhanced use of technology within higher education. A more inclusive learning and working environment for those who stammer will result in more students and staff feeling happier and supported to fulfil their potential, inclusive of those with and without a speech impediment.

KEYWORDS: stammering, stuttering, inclusion, recommendations, awareness, experiences.

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Introduction

Stammering (or stuttering) is a neurological condition affecting speech; it can lead to the elongation of words and repetition of some syllables (National Health Service, 2023). The way disabilities are defined can vary from country to country; in the UK, stammering can be classified as a disability if there is a pronounced impact on a person's ability to perform day-to-day activities (STAMMA, 2019). However, even the term disability poses questions, as critical disability theory (CDT) would prompt questions related to whether stammering is a disability or if society generally is unequipped to make accommodations to assist people who stammer (Goodley, 2013). Currently, it is estimated that around 1% of adults have a stammer

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(STAMMA, 2022, para. 2). It is difficult to deduce if the university population is representative of this due to limited statistics regarding stammering in the UK student population. Within the UK, The Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) is responsible for the collection of data on students, and disabilities are grouped together, with the category responsible for stammering referred to as 'social/communication conditions such as a speech and language impairment or an autistic spectrum condition' (HESA, n.d.). Within the full-time student populous in the UK, there are 22,560 (rounded to the nearest 5) students in this category, out of a possible 2.9 million students (HESA, 2025). Even if all 22,560 students stammer, this is still only around 0.8% of the student population, around 7000 students below what would be expected from a rate of 1% (29,000 students). Such a broad category also means it is not possible to differentiate between students who stammer, and those with other social conditions such as an autism spectrum disorder. It is worth noting that the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS), the body responsible for handling university admissions in the UK, explicitly place stammering within the social and communication disorder category (UCAS, n.d.). Perhaps this low rate of disclosure is why many universities do not advertise support for students who stammer. Of course, not all students who stammer may disclose this as a disability, as there are a variety of reasons why a student may not choose to do this, such as not understanding what could be done, or feeling as though they are able to cope on their own (Grimes et al., 2019).

Almost all UK universities have a disability services webpage and, on these pages, can list conditions where support is offered. Very few webpages contain the phrase 'stammer' or information on support for students who stammer, as shown in Table 1 in the Appendix. Of the 141 UK universities listed by the organisation Universities UK (n.d.), only 17 contain stammering in relation to support for students, and even then, this may be signposting to other webpages to give careers support rather than the provision of disability-based support. This is not to say other universities do not offer support, indeed they might, but just not advertise it, which could act as a barrier to students wishing to study. This lack of acknowledgement or advertisement suggests that there is an issue with the visibility and associated support for stammering within UK institutions. This broadly agrees with Meredith et al. (2012), whose research about the disability webpages and policies in Australian universities also revealed little-to-no mention of stammering.

Experiences and problems within universities

Student issues and experiences

At university, students can face many different communication-based challenges, such as public speaking, academic presentations, and socialising with peers. Butler (2013) found people who stammer can have a feeling of apprehension about attending university, fuelled in part by a wish to not replicate their school experience. Butler further notes that often prospective students are unaware as to what universities can do to accommodate their needs, matching our observations that few universities mention support for stammering. Sasso et al. (2025) report the experiences of 10 students who stammer at US universities, most of whom describe their experience at university as 'frustrating' and 'tiring'. Furthermore, the experiences shared by Sasso et al. (2025) involve people who stammer being excluded from societies, organisations, and wider aspects of student life. Other students demonstrated a lack of awareness of how to properly support peers who stammer through attempting to correct or complete sentences for them.

Authority figures within higher education, such as lecturers or supervisors, have a real impact on the experience of students at university. It was found that members of staff who were aware of stammering had a more positive impact on students' time at university than those who were unaware (Azios et al., 2022). Having said this, generally, there seems to be a more negative attitude in society towards those who stammer, with people who stammer perceived to have more negative personality traits such as shyness, nervousness, and/or incompetency (Dorsey & Guenther, 2000). Such biases emphasise a need for greater awareness on stammering amongst academics and others that support students at university. Indeed, it was reported that students who stammered were discouraged from pursuing various careers or courses at university (such as 'speech and language' courses) as seen in Isaacs' experience (Isaacs, 2020). Perhaps, such negative biases can lead to this exclusive behaviour. Instead, staff should consider how a course could be adapted or how a student can be provided with additional support, rather than insisting a student is not suited to a course. This aligns with the notion in CDT that the problem is how society copes with other peoples' impairments, rather than having an impairment.

In universities there is a growing trend is for greater student involvement within classes, using so-called flipped (or active) learning, where students take a more active role in the

development of the session. As part of flipped learning, there is a greater emphasis on collaborative activities, such as presentations and discussions, which for most students can be quite an anxious and fearful experience, but for those who stammer, can be far worse, with increased anxiety a common experience (Craig & Tran, 2006; Grieve et al., 2021; Mann & Clift, 2021; Sasso et al., 2025). There is little research on how those who stammer are impacted by presentations and very little research on the experiences of students in the UK who stammer; it would be useful to gain further insights from such research whether it be related to online presentations or otherwise. Additionally, in recent years, online meeting tools have been utilised for summatively assessed presentations and groupwork (Hurst, 2020). This can present further challenges for students who stammer especially when done synchronously. One adjustment could be the facilitation of asynchronous assessment of students through pre-recorded presentations and live questioning as opposed to both components of online presentation-based assessments being synchronous. Asking questions is an important part of flipped learning, but students seldom ask questions in lectures, even though they might say they are prepared to, and describe being afraid to speak in front of peers or staff (Mladenova et al., 2021). How prepared would students who stammer be to ask questions, if the average student is also unwilling? Butler (2013) wrote of the experiences of people who stammer who have graduated from university and notes that the relative anonymity offered by lectures was 'welcomed'. This contrasts with the previous experiences of these graduates when in secondary education, where the small groups in classrooms are more intimate and more attention is given to individuals. Of course, there are methods for communicating in lectures without requiring in-person speaking with tools such as Mentimeter, Padlet and others, allowing for instantaneous feedback with a sense of anonymity (Mentimeter, n.d.; Padlet, n.d.). Such tools are implemented to increase engagement within lectures for all students (Neumann, 2020).

Within higher education, the presence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and generative tools is becoming more prevalent which can lead to concerns about academic misconduct in assessments. So called 'AI-Resistant' assessments, which universities may move to adopt, can contain barriers to those who stammer, with oral presentations highlighted as something that can replace traditional essays to examine knowledge, whilst mitigating the amount of assistance AI can provide (Ncube et al., 2025). These presentations may lead to increased

focus on the fluency of the speaker rather than the content, and so could be detrimental to people who stammer depending on assessment design.

Part of university life for students is a focus on graduate employment, with universities often providing support to students seeking external employment. Butler (2014) reports that when people who stammer seek employment, they are concerned with what they can do rather than what they would have wished to do, with many participants going on to do 'backroom' roles. Furthermore, Butler refers to the concept of aesthetic work, where employers are concerned with appearances of employees, and a key part of this is verbal communication where people who stammer are not perceived as well as those that do not. It has also been noted that careers which involve speaking in high pressure environments are not recommended as much to people who stammer compared to careers which involve little communication (Dew & Gabel, 2024). Careers services and employers should review how different career pathways can be made more accessible and inclusive, instead of careers advisors discouraging a pathway, especially if a student wants to explore a specific career. Some universities have dedicated webpages for disabled students looking for careers and within these, there is minimal advice for people who stammer, beyond signposting to STAMMA (the British Stammering Association) for further guidance. Within higher education, there may also be issues with actioning suggestions made by disability services. For example, experiences from students who identified with a visual impairment or blindness have shown failings in some instances where promises made by universities were left unfulfilled, with bureaucracy and assumptions about needs highlighted as problems (Croft, 2021; Koutsouris et al., 2026). It has also been reported that students who are blind encounter another issue, where the onus appears to be pushed onto them to be advocates for improving conditions, rather than the university taking responsibility, with some feeling a need to remind instructors of accommodations that needed to be made (Bulk et al., 2022). It is likely that people who stammer may experience similar difficulties to those outlined above.

Staff issues and experiences

Staff who stammer can face similar problems to students, with student evaluations being an important metric to measure teaching quality for academic staff. Professors are affected by these evaluations with lecturers' attitudes towards teaching negatively impacted by poor evaluations (Kowai-Bell et al., 2012). Additionally, such student evaluations act as important

metrics in career progression. One lecturer reported positive feedback when his stammering was disclosed, highlighting one benefit of early disclosure where students were more patient with him when this was explained (Shoop-Worrall, 2023). An area of possible exploration is how academics who stammer are impacted by such student evaluations and how staff can be supported accordingly. Lecture capture technologies are now integrated within higher education, with Panopto (lecture capture software company) estimating 80% of US institutions use such software (Panopto, 2020, para. 1). It is known that students find lecture capture technologies useful, but little is known of the opinions and experiences of lecturers who stammer on lecture capture systems (Nordmann et al., 2022). Along these lines, staff meetings are often recorded where akin to the above, presenters who stammer may share similar experiences as to when lecturing to students is recorded.

Participation in committees can form a significant component to the lives of staff at universities. Mann reports a feeling of not involving himself in departmental discussions and an 'overreliance on electronic forms of communication' (Mann & Clift, 2021, p. 114). Active contributions in committees and meetings are often crucial for career progression, with participation viewed as beneficial for promotion, and so exclusion from taking part, even self-exclusion, due to anxieties related to stammering, could be damaging to successful departmental integration and progression. These staff meetings or committees can occur virtually, with online meeting tools met with a mix of opinions from people who stammer. This is in regards to whether it is preferable to hold meetings in-person, with the advantage of clearer body language and increased non-verbal cues, or online, which can allow for reduced anxiety with the ability to turn the camera off (Wu, 2023). Typically, online meeting software has built-in features, such as the hand-raise tool, to mitigate the problem of participants interrupting one another. In conjunction with co-workers, Wu also writes of her own experience as a person who stammers, and mentions the 'substantial emotional and cognitive efforts' that must be put in compared to someone who does not stammer (Wu et al., 2024, p. 11).

It is almost certain staff will deliver presentations as part of their role at work. Sometimes it may feel easier to present to a large audience, with the sea of faces feeling more like anonymity compared to that of a small group, where each audience member is more alert and observable. The opinion of people who stammer is not known on this issue and so could

be further researched. A common technique to alleviate stammering is to substitute words for synonyms which are easier to say; this may require more planning and time to be devoted to giving lectures than someone who does not need to plan which words are more manageable to use (Mann & Clift, 2021; Walton, 2020). Academic staff are also likely to present their work/research at conferences, which may be stressful or overwhelming for those who stammer. Mann highlights that he must undertake considerable extra work in order to approach situations compared to someone who does not stammer (Mann & Clift, 2021). Mann also describes the issue of whether and when to disclose his stammer, noting that when speaking, this is not optional.

Recommendations for universities to improve inclusivity

Support is available for universities to access, with many free resources online provided by interest groups and charities. A publication co-written by several stammering organisations in the UK describes recommendations for institutions to follow in order to improve inclusivity for people who stammer (STAMMA et al., 2021). This report contains many recommendations for higher education institutions to follow, such as a need for institutions to advertise support to help guide students to consult with disability services. The report from STAMMA also asks universities to consider the wording of learning objectives for courses, with a focus on replacing the concept of fluency and instead using 'effective communication' such that the effects of stammering are not considered as part of an assessment but rather the focus is on the content of a presentation. Meredith, a lecturer who stammers, advises students to disclose to university support services that they stammer (Meredith, 2019). He encourages students to be 'very firm with your intentions' (para. 3), emphasising a need for students to 'try to be confident and forward' such that reasonable adjustments can be put in place (para. 4).

Oral assessments and presentations are a key part of university life and Al Arefi (2021) gives guidance on improving inclusivity in this area. Al Arefi's (2021) recommendations can be summarised as ensuring assessors have a thorough understanding of the condition, the ways it can present itself, and common mechanisms which people can use to cope, such as word substitution. Additionally, Al Arefi notes that extra time would be appropriate for oral assessments. It would also be fitting to consider the needs of students in question and response situations. Reports from STAMMA (STAMMA et al., 2021) and Advance HE (Al Arefi,

2021) recommend providing students with the ability to follow up such sessions with written responses.

One method of assessment delivered by universities and many employers is through video interviews/vivas, where a recording is made. This is typically done through a series of questions and responses that are delivered in one take. It would be beneficial to allow interviewees the opportunity to re-record such responses, such that it de-emphasises the ability to do things perfectly in one take with fluency, and more about competency and knowledge of the subject area. It may be appropriate for questions to be given in advance of interviews, to evaluate the knowledge/experience of candidates as opposed to questioning them on the spot.

One prominent theme seen through interviews with students who stammer is that of exclusion, with students reporting a feeling of not belonging or their presence not being particularly wanted at meetings or societies due to the effects of a stammer (Sasso et al., 2025). One method of improving inclusion is through support groups, which allow people to get together and communicate problems or share experiences. People who stammer who attend support groups are known to have less negative attitudes about their stammer towards themselves, and indeed feel more satisfied from supporting others (Boyle, 2013). In addition, it has been established that it is emotionally and cognitively draining for those who stammer to deliver presentations. This could be alleviated through careful timetabling such that sessions are not crammed together with little time between them for preparation and recovery.

The navigability of university webpages should be addressed, particularly in relation to disability services, with some sites being much harder to navigate through than others. It is advised that Information Technology (IT) and disability services should work together more closely to improve the visibility of stammering on these pages. Academic units could also improve their advertisement of support with posters and a normalisation of disability within departments. Visiting lecturers are a good way to introduce new, and more diverse, topics to staff and interested students to improve understanding of this issue.

The UK National Health Service (NHS) Stammering Network offers advice for supporting colleagues who stammer. The majority of guidance is to be mindful and patient such as not offering your own advice on speaking and not being tempted to interrupt or trying to correct

sentences (National Health Service, n.d.). This is furthered by urging managers to not use performance reviews to focus on verbal communication skills in those that stammer.

Conclusion

Awareness of stammering support is quite low in UK universities, with under-self-reporting and a lack of advertised support being commonplace. However, there are recommendations in place from professional organisations, which universities can access to help improve their services. One recommendation that is not widely adopted in student assessment is focusing more on effective communication rather than fluency (Al Arefi, 2021).

Research on stammering in higher education from both student and staff perspectives is not well developed, especially as instruction and communication modalities have changed with the increased adoption of technology in recent years, such as an increase in the use of AI. The impact and use of lecture/meeting recording technology and online meetings and assessment types for people who stammer has not been well explored. It is advised that as instructional methods and working practices in higher education evolve that implications for those who stammer are duly considered with appropriate adjustments put in place to make for a more inclusive environment to study and work.

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Appendix

Table 1. Different ways stammering is mentioned in all 141 UK universities' websites.

Category	Number of universities
Mentioned in disability services context	9
Mentioned in employment/careers context	4
Mentioned in another context[a]	4

Note. The 141 universities were listed on universities.uk. Stammering may be mentioned in the context of student stories or blog posts on university websites, but this is not included.

[a]Such contexts may include: signposting from documents found by searching, a factsheet found through searching, and/or support specifically for staff.