Submission from the AQA Student Advisory Group

To the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England

Introduction

This submission to the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England's call for evidence is based on the expertise and insights of AQA's Student Advisory Group.

Our Student Advisory Group (SAG) was established to give young learners a voice in the exam system.

The group is made up of 15 students from different types of schools and colleges across England. The students meet with other members, AQA colleagues and Trustees to:

- provide valuable insights and student views on key areas of assessment
- help us make important decisions about the future of exams.

The group helps us shape the ways AQA listens to the school and college student community. In return, students gain valuable experience and develop skills that will help them in their future careers.

Given that our Student Advisory Group have current and direct insights into the education system, we wanted to focus our submission on their experiences and how oracy can be incorporated into the curriculum looking to the future.

Should the Commission wish to speak with any of our members about its work, we would be delighted to welcome you to a future meeting of the Student Advisory Group. Should the Commission wish to speak to wider AQA representatives, for example assessment or education policy experts, we would also be delighted to facilitate this. AQA has written publicly about oracy education, and you can find that article here.

Please see below the feedback received from several members of the SAG which has been grouped under the headings as set out in the Commission's call for evidence.

Links between oracy and specific subject outcomes

1. A member of our Student Advisory Group noted that they believe that oracy is incredibly important but that their only experience with oracy tests is MFL speaking exams and the GCSE English Language Speaking component. They noted that they enjoyed this component and appreciated being able to choose a topic that they cared about.

   They did, however, add that some of their peers thought it was a slightly pointless exercise, as it didn't contribute towards their final grade. One suggestion they made was that it could be useful

to go back to integrating this component back into the overall English Language grade as this could encourage schools to place a well-deserved emphasis on oracy.

2. Another commented 'I'm doing A-levels in maths, physics, and computer science, which aren't typically associated with using words or debating. However, I believe it's vital to learn how to articulate our ideas well and present arguments clearly. This not only improves classroom discussions but also prepares us for the future, whether in academic research or business.'

3. 'I would certainly like to see a more long-term, structured approach to encouraging oracy rather than solely the GCSE speaking component. It felt a little like being thrust in at the deep end, especially if you haven't had many oracy opportunities offered like debates or can't practice at home. I felt the same during my French GCSE speaking exam, as it was a skill we didn't have the facilities to practice in the classroom.'

4. 'I remember part of the criteria for the GCSE Speaking component was to speak in Standard English, yet for some of my classmates this did not reflect how they spoke in everyday life. While it's undoubtedly important that young people can speak in a professional manner, I think that a balance should be struck when assessing oracy between a useful skill and realistic, representative speak, especially with the rise of Multicultural British English amongst young people.'

5. '8:30am to 3pm everyday, I train my oracy. How? By simply being an active participant in class. Asking questions, being precise in explaining the issue I'm facing. Further Maths, for example, is notorious for its tricky topics. So, to help my teacher help me, I place the onus upon myself to explain the difficulties I face with extreme specificity. What's the outcome? I plug the gaps in my understanding. And, everyday, I keep plugging them, making sure I fully understand the concepts, and therefore ensuring I have a good chance of smashing my exams. Oracy means you can help your teacher help you; and what else can do more when you're trying to up your grades?'

Links between oracy and outcomes in career and business

1. One member of the Student Advisory Group noted 'Software Engineers are paid a lot of money. They're building our future; it's to be expected. Yet, companies spend millions extra each year to hire people like product managers, simply to do a job which most software engineers can't: convince an audience. They understand what the software engineers have made, put their own spin on it, and use their oracy to blow people away, convincing investors and higher-ups that this is the next big thing. Already, millions are being earned, simply because these individuals have great oracy. Suffice it to say, oracy will be imperative to outcomes for years to come. Just imagine how much further you could go as a software engineer with excellent oracy!'

2. Another noted 'having the confidence to express yourself is undoubtedly a critical skill, in both the workplace and the social sphere. Students should leave the education system equipped with the toolbox to succeed in interviews and daily life. I have heard that there is a more integrated approach to oracy at UK independent schools, almost a 'hidden curriculum', where oracy is encouraged from year 7.'

3. A third member said, 'I understand how important it is to express yourself well in interviews, whether for job applications or university admissions. In the comprehensive schools I've attended, there hasn't been much emphasis on developing oracy skills. I assume private schools focus more on oracy because their students are more likely to apply to Oxbridge and other top universities that require interviews. This disparity is concerning since oracy skills are crucial in the workplace, meaning students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds might miss out on developing these skills.'

4. 'Discussing collaboration possibilities between two businesses is usually better through speech as it is better to decide whether this is the partner you want through directly speaking to them. Contract terms could be more easily discussed and by clear and accurate communication with customers or employers, the employee could hinder the chance of communication problems so employers like that employee more and higher chance of increased pay and promotion.'

Links between oracy and mental health

In response to this point, one of the Student Advisory Group noted, 'Oracy and mental health have an interestingly symbiotic relationship. It's clear that, in dealing with your mental health, talking to others is hugely important -- it's not smart to face challenges alone. As such, how well you articulate your feelings is key to ensuring others have an understanding of how they can help and be there for you. Oracy empowers you to incite empathy; and empathy is imperative to maintaining good mental health!'

Links between oracy, advocacy and democracy

1. 'I think life is 50% what you say, and 50% how you say it. This is increasingly important since nowadays short form content dominates our attention span. We're more focused on quick sound bites above all else, ignoring the importance of context, and making snap judgments far greater than we ever have before. Given this, oracy has become increasing important in both advocacy and democracy. Being able to concisely convey a point not only ensures that you can advocate for an idea and stand up for what you believe is right, even considering the shortcomings of short-form content, but it also, frankly, means that people will actually listen to you instead of merely dismissing you with immediacy. Once you've managed to ace the 50% of how you say it, the 50% of what you say will turn from trash to treasure in the eyes' of the people.'

2. 'Oracy allows one to better present an idea they propose without misunderstandings to enhance efficiency of discussions and implementation of a new law, for example. It also allows effective communication between the government and citizens so the government understands what citizens want and citizens understand new thoughts governments have and react accordingly.'

The role of oracy in the context of rapid technological development

1. 'Given the current political climate and the influence of social media algorithms… critical thinking skills, and the ability to debate and reason clearly, are essential. These skills are closely linked to how well we engage with democracy and advocacy.

2. 'In terms of technological developments, I think it's become incredibly easy to ask an AI generator such as ChatGPT to produce an essay that might appear convincing at a first glance, though is riddled with false arguments and misconceptions. Therefore, I think it's important that

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we learn how to identify sophistry and that we're encouraged to be more discerning when reading content online.'

3. 'Technological advancement roots in people creating new ideas, so if people cannot express themselves fluently, then they can't share ideas and cannot bring about new changes.'

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