

# Journal of Further and Higher Education



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjfh20

# Student fears of oral presentations and public speaking in higher education: a qualitative survey

R. Grieve, J. Woodley, S. E. Hunt & A. McKay

To cite this article: R. Grieve, J. Woodley, S. E. Hunt & A. McKay (2021) Student fears of oral presentations and public speaking in higher education: a qualitative survey, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 45:9, 1281-1293, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2021.1948509

To link to this article: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1948509">https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1948509</a>

9	© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
	Published online: 15 Jul 2021.
	Submit your article to this journal $oldsymbol{oldsymbol{\mathcal{C}}}$
hh	Article views: 2299
α	View related articles 🗗
CrossMark	View Crossmark data ☑



#### ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates



# Student fears of oral presentations and public speaking in higher education: a qualitative survey

R. Grieve na, J. Woodleya, S. E. Hunt na and A. McKayb

<sup>a</sup>Department of Allied Health Professions, Faculty of Health & Applied Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK; bLibrary Services, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

#### **ABSTRACT**

Oral presentations and public speaking are an important aspect of the student experience in the United Kingdom higher education. Many modules (self-contained units normally within a programme of study) use presentations as a form of assessment and require students to verbally engage in small and large group settings to enhance learning. Previous research evidence has indicated that many students experience fear in public speaking. The aims of this qualitative survey were two-fold. First, it sought to gather further insight into the fears experienced and strategies used by students who fear public speaking, including oral presentations. The second objective was to determine whether their fear affected their experience of higher education. A qualitative survey comprising four open-ended questions was completed by 46 undergraduate and postgraduate students with a fear of public speaking from the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol. All participants were attending one of the Stand Up and Be Heard (SUBH) UWE library-based workshops for fear of public speaking. Thematic analysis was used to identify the following six themes, namely: fear of being judged, physical symptoms, uncertainty about the topic, negative effect on university experience, practice and preparation, and more practical support needed. The results of this survey identify the specific fears students have in public speaking and provide evidence of the overall negative effect on their higher education experience. This survey provides further evidence that higher education institutions should acknowledge public speaking fear among some students and provide more support in oral presentation assessments.

#### **ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received 17 June 2020 Accepted 22 June 2021

#### **KEYWORDS**

Public speaking; fear; oral presentations; higher education

# Introduction

Varying terms are used in the literature to describe a fear of public speaking and are often used interchangeably, such as stage fright (Bippus et al. 1999), communication apprehension (CA) (McCroskey et al. 2014) or public speaking anxiety (Bodie 2010). More specifically related to this qualitative survey, public speaking anxiety is defined by Bodie (2010, 72) 'as a situation specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation.' Another commonly used term is glossophobia, which is the fear of public speaking or speaking in general (Hancock et al. 2010). The term glossophobia comes from the Greek glossa, meaning tongue, and phobos, fear or dread.

Related to a fear of public speaking, is Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) which may have a direct impact on public speaking and social interaction by students. Importantly, SAD is characterised by fear or anxiety in social interaction or performance situations in which the individual is exposed to unfamiliar people or possible scrutiny by others and is a mental health diagnosis, classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

Relatively little is known about the effects of social anxiety on students studying in higher education (Russell and Topham 2012). More recently, Pörhölä, Almonkari, and Kunttu (2019) have identified research evidence from their previous research and others, to support the view that some students experience high levels of social anxiety in university learning situations (Almonkari and Kunttu 2012; Kunttu and Huttunen 2009; Russell and Shaw 2009; Russell and Topham 2012). Prevalence estimates for SAD in university students have been identified in the literature by Kählke et al. (2019), ranging from 3.4% (12 months) in the United States (US) (Blanco et al. 2008) to 16.1% (point prevalence) in Sweden (Tillfors and Furmark 2007). In a prevalence survey at a large university and its partnership colleges in the United Kingdom (UK), approximately 10% of the students reported severe social anxiety (Russell and Shaw 2009).

A survey of students from two UK universities, found the highest number of students (80%) reported that oral presentations were a source of social anxiety impacting on learning and well-being. Findings revealed lower ratings for seminars (range 45–52%), group work (25–26%), lectures (14 26%), and sharing IT facilities (8–13%) (Russell and Topham 2012). Public speaking is a common fear selected by US college students (61%) and ranks second in the top three concerns, behind death and financial problems (Dwyer and Davidson 2012). A more recent study of undergraduate students in the US found that 64% reported a fear of public speaking (Ferreira Marinho et al. 2017). Public speaking fears of university students have been described in the literature as internal and external fears (LeFebvre, LeFebvre, and Allen 2018). Internal fears are perceptions about the speaking situation that are specifically related to the delivery and the personal feelings the individual speaker is experiencing, whereas external fears deal with being the focus of attention related to the audience during public speaking (LeFebvre, LeFebvre, and Allen 2018).

While assessments in higher education are dominated by written formats, including written examinations, essays, and other written assignments, the use of oral forms of assessment to test students' knowledge and understanding are nevertheless widespread (Joughin 2007). Public speaking and oral assessments are common assessment types in higher education and serve to measure a student's capacity to create and deliver an engaging, informed, and persuasive argument (Nash, Crimmins, and Oprescu 2016). Public speaking and oral presentations are also examples of generic or personal transferable skills that may enhance employability. Linked to these personal transferable skills, a survey of employers supported previous international research regarding the need for communication ability in new graduates (Clokie and Fourie 2016). However, there seems to be a disconnect as a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews revealed that students did not seem to enjoy working in groups nor enjoy participation in oral presentations (Shah 2013). In relation to previously discussed evidence is an expected finding in respect of public speaking and oral presentations.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift to online provision or blended approaches where learning is facilitated through a combination of online and campus learning (Petronzi and Petronzi 2020). To date, there is minimal evidence on how this new online approach to learning and teaching has affected students' fear or experience of public speaking and oral assessment.

A phenomenographic study of students' experience of oral presentations, found they constituted three contrasting conceptions of oral presentations, namely: as a transmission of ideas; as a test of students' understanding of what they were studying; as a position to be argued (Joughin 2007). However, public speaking assessments and specifically oral presentations have also been identified as a cause of anxiety and stress, an issue that is rarely addressed by the students suffering from the associated problems or teachers who set up public speaking assessment tasks (Nash, Crimmins, and

Oprescu 2016). Although there is an awareness of student anxiety in oral presentations and public speaking, more research evidence is needed regarding specific fears and the strategies that students use to address them. Further evidence is also required on how fear of public speaking and oral presentations affect students' university experience. This information would help educators in the planning of assessed oral presentations, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of students' fears and support their needs.

This qualitative survey had two aims. The first was to gather further insight into students' fears about public speaking, including oral presentations, and the strategies they used to overcome them. The second objective was to determine whether their fear of public speaking affected their experience of higher education

### Method

# Design

A qualitative survey comprising four open-ended questions.

# **Participants and recruitment**

All participants recruited for this study were undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of the West of England (UWE), with a fear of public speaking, who attended a three-hour UWE SUBH workshops at either the Glenside, Frenchay or City Campuses.

All students who registered for the SUBH workshops online via the Library study skills events page were invited to participate in this qualitative survey. All potential participants were issued with a participant information sheet (PIS) and informed consent form to complete. Participants were requested to complete the informed consent form and email it with their completed data collection sheet (comprising four open-ended questions) or to bring completed hard copies to the SUBH workshop. Participants were further reminded at the start of the SUBH workshop about the research project and PIS and data collection sheets were supplied on request.

It was also made clear to all participants in the online SUBH workshop registration information that participation in this research was voluntary that they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time and this would not affect their SUBH workshop attendance.

Purposive sampling was used in the recruitment as this enables recruitment of participants who have the best knowledge concerning the research topic (Elo et al. 2014). The saturation of data was used to indicate the optimal sample size for this qualitative survey as this is the most widely used principle for determining sample size and evaluating its sufficiency (Vasileiou et al. 2018)

The UWE Faculty Research Ethics Committee reviewed and approved this study.

# Data analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to explore SUBH workshop participant's responses to four open-ended questions regarding their fears, strategies, and their awareness of possible university support in giving presentations and public speaking.

The four open-ended questions were:

- (1) What are your main issues/fears in public speaking (including presentations)?
- (2) What strategies have you used to reduce your fear of public speaking (including presentations)?
- (3) Does your fear of public speaking affect your student experience of higher education?
- (4) How could the university support you and other students with a fear of public speaking?

The thematic analysis method used was not based on a philosophical premise but guided by the six stages identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely: familiarising yourself with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

Although thematic analysis has become the most commonly used qualitative data analysis method, one of the criticisms is that researchers rarely report in depth on the process of doing the analysis (McClean et al. 2020). This criticism has been partly addressed by describing and following the six stages (Braun and Clarke 2006) above in conducting the thematic analysis in this qualitative survey.

The lead researchers (RG) and JW initially coded the responses to the four open-ended questions and searched for themes independently to ensure inter-code reliability (Cook 2012). The two researchers then met up and discussed the coding, reviewed, defined, and named the final themes from the data.

#### Results

Forty-six undergraduate and postgraduate students attending the SUBH workshops on three of the university campuses participated in this study; 33 females (72%), 7 males (15%), and 6 participants (13%) did not report their gender. Most participants answered all four open questions although some individual open questions were not completed.

The following six final main themes were developed after thematic analysis and discussion between two of the researchers (RG and JW), namely: fear of being judged; physical symptoms;

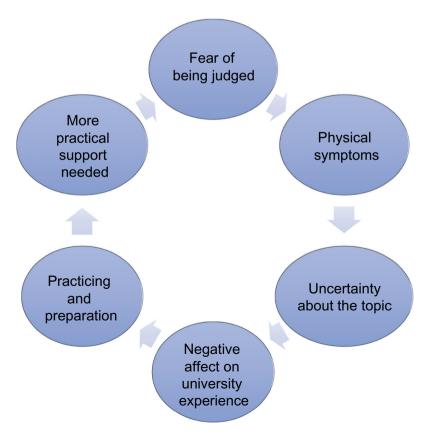


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the six main themes.



uncertainty about the topic; negative effect on university experience; practice and preparation; more practical support needed (see Figure 1).

# Fear of being judged

This theme was a direct response to the first open question asking what the main issues/fears in public speaking and oral presentations were that students experienced. The fear of being judged is an external fear that related strongly to the fact that many students felt uncomfortable standing up and speaking in front of an audience:

'Don`t like people looking at me'.
'Standing up in front of people'.
'Talking in front of a large audience'.
'Fear of standing up in front of a group of people who are focussing on me'.

Related to standing up in front of an audience the overwhelming response was that students felt they were being judged:

Fear of being judged. (This comment was expressed by many students in the study)

Closely related to being judged was the concern about audience reaction to the student speaking in public:

'Worried of what people will think'.
'Worry that people are not interested'.
The audience may not be interested in what I say'.
That people will laugh at me'.

This feeling of 'being judged' may limit a student's ability in oral assessments when they are assessed and graded on their presentation. This overriding fear may limit the ability to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, intellectual skills and fully address the oral presentation assessment guidelines. Further to formal oral assessments, the concern of 'being judged' may limit active learning with respect to asking questions and interacting with peers during seminars and other learning opportunities. Being perceived favourably becomes a greater priority than participating in a learning opportunity or communicating with the group.

# **Physical symptoms**

This theme was in direct response to the first open question asking what the main issues/fears in public speaking and oral presentations were that students experienced. This theme is a combination of internal and external fears, and a clear example of the physical signs/symptoms and 'flight or fight' response to an external stimulus/fear:

'Physical clues I am nervous e.g. shaking hands, tongue-tied speech'.

'Panic attack that would stop me communicating'.

'Going red/blushing'.

"Throat seems dry, hands sweaty and emotional experience is overwhelming enough to cause me to become tearful."

'Going red when I start to talk.'

"Physical symptoms of stress

These physical symptoms would directly affect a student's experience of public speaking and would negatively affect their learning. The above described physical symptoms are related to the above theme 'fear of being judged' as the innate fear would be on display and clearly identifiable by others.



# Uncertainty about the topic

This theme was also closely related to the first open question on what the main issues, and, or fears in public speaking and oral presentations were that students experienced. This theme is an internal fear about the topic, although also related to external fears, audience reaction, and a prevalent response in this survey:

'Making a mistake'.

'Forgetting parts of what I need to say'.

'Forgetting what I'm supposed to say, causing me to mess up even more'. "Coming across that I don't know what I'm on about."

'My main issues/fears in public speaking is that I am afraid of any kind of mistakes'.

'Getting it wrong'.

Uncertainty about the topic is an aspect of public speaking that appears to relate to how the audience may respond negatively to a student who has a lack of subject knowledge. This theme's focus appears to be related to making mistakes and getting information wrong. This desire to not get anything wrong, striving for perfection may increase stress and anxiety levels in relation to public speaking. Managing expectations away from a perfect delivery and towards an increased knowledge and understanding of the topic may be a key method to decrease fear and is a simple strategy in relation to reducing public speaking fear.

# Negative effect on university experience

This theme was in response to the third open question relating to how public speaking affects student experience in higher education. The overwhelming response was one of the negativity and an adverse effect on the individual student experience:

'I feel I would be able to attain better marks if I were able to present more effectively'

'It sometimes stops me from participating in discussions'

It has put me off doing modules because of a presentation element"

Yes, not really asking questions so can understand things

'Yes, it can do as sometimes my fear obstructs what my educational focus is meant to be'

'Brings anxiety to speak in class'

'I actively never attempted a degree until now (age 40) in part because I knew I would be expected to present and did not feel able'

This overall negative effect on university experience clearly shows that public speaking fear pervades all aspects of the student experience and is not just related to oral presentations. The data suggests that students' public speaking fear affects learning in respect of interaction in class, asking questions and anxiety to speak, which are all key aspects to enhance learning. Further to fear of public speaking affecting learning, it appears to influence fundamental decisions about participating in education, reducing confidence in attending university and impacting progress.

# **Practicing and preparation**

This theme was related to the second open question asking students what strategies they used to reduce their fear of public speaking including oral presentations. This theme confirms that although there may be issues with respect to how best to practice, the majority of the students we surveyed realise the importance of practicing public speaking:

'Talking presentation throughout loud'.

'Breathing exercises beforehand'.

'Practice before giving presentation e.g. talking to the cats!'

'Recording a practice presentation to view myself'.

'Practice to peers'.

'Present the presentation to a small selection of people, whom I find intimidating to rehearse the presentation and get ready to when it comes to presenting the presentation in front of a large group of highly knowledgeable experts and professionals'.

The data revealed that many students had a clear idea of the breadth of practice techniques including breathing techniques, recording of presentations, practicing to peers and speaking out loud. All these methods of practice have been advocated in the literature to increase public speaking proficiency. This awareness of varying practice techniques is encouraging but does not fully equate with the high levels of anxiety and fear of public speaking that students overwhelmingly felt in this survey and link to the final theme identified: practical support.

# More practical support needed

This final theme was in response to the fourth and final open question on how the University could support students with a fear of public speaking. It was acknowledged that the SUBH workshops were of benefit to many students, although other suggestions were made for student public speaking support:

'Show us how! Physical workshops are effective and essential'.

'Opportunities to practice public speaking in a relaxing atmosphere'.

'Practice sessions and small groups'.

"Hold more sessions linked to courses to help students overcome their fears".

Teaching presentation skills as part of the course'.

'More opportunities for practice'.

'Tutorial support.'

"Maybe incorporate classes into the timetables, not as mandatory but will let students be more aware about them".

The responses to this question were informative with respect to learning, teaching and student support. Specifically, suggestions were related to tutorial support, teaching presentation skills as part of the course and incorporating public speaking classes into the timetable. Students gave practical and useful public speaking support suggestions that could be adopted at a module, programme, and university-wide level. There was limited data with respect to the quality of support provided, although this was not a specific open question.

# **Discussion**

The main findings from this qualitative survey have clearly indicated that for those students with a fear of public speaking and oral presentations, public speaking tasks have an overall negative effect on learning and the student experience. Specifically, the findings have indicated that many students' main fears are associated with being judged, uncertainty about the topic and physical symptoms. This survey also clearly indicated that most of the students in this study, although fearful of public speaking, were aware of the importance of practice and preparation. The findings clearly identified the lack of and need for further comprehensive support for students with a fear of public speaking.

A qualitative study on self-described fears related to public speaking from university and college students in the US (LeFebvre, LeFebvre, and Allen 2018) identified 12 common themes from students on an introductory communication course that included both internal and external fears. An important finding from this research was that internal fears accounted for 25% and external fears 75% of student public speaking anxiety. Overall, the most commonly reported fear by students (30%) was the external fear 'audience responses', related to perceived attitudes from the audience towards the speaker. These perceived attitudes that students found challenging included judgement from the audience, being the focus of attention and no interaction from the audience.

The next most commonly reported fear (23%) in that study was an ability to self-regulate. The researchers described this as students' fear about their own performance during a speech, which included fears about their own recall of information or their inability to remember presentation content during a speech (LeFebvre, LeFebvre, and Allen 2018).

In this qualitative survey, two of the key findings or identified themes, 'fear of being judged' (external fear related to the audience) and 'uncertainty about the topic' (internal fear) are closely related and clearly supported in the above student self-described fears study (LeFebvre, LeFebvre, and Allen 2018). The 'fear of being judged', was clearly related to audience response and most participants expressed fears related to standing up in front of an audience. More recently, LeFebvre et al. (2020) conducted a study addressing student public speaking anxiety through an introductory speaking course and found that 'memory glitches' were the most cited overall public speaking fear. This further supports the key theme in this survey 'uncertainty about the topic' where forgetting material in public speaking was a predominant fear and occurrence. Further to internal fears, in a questionnaire concerning fear of public speaking of undergraduate students in higher education, the main findings showed an association between students with negative self-perceptions of their voice and public-speaking fear (Ferreira Marinho et al. 2017).

In this qualitative survey, 'physical symptoms' were identified as one of the six main themes and LeFebvre, LeFebvre, and Allen (2018) also found physiological problems described as 'excessive activation' to be an issue among students.

In respect of physical symptoms, public speaking fear may affect the speaker physically with a dry mouth, increased blood pressure, blushing, sweating, irregular breathing, and emotionally in the form of feelings of humiliation and concerns about looking foolish (Kushner 2004). Most of these physical symptoms were described by the participants in this survey and could be related to the 'fight or flight' response. The 'fight or flight' response, is usually short-lived and the restoration of balance or homoeostasis is regulated by the parasympathetic nervous system; however, it can become damaging if initiated repeatedly or over prolonged time periods in the absence of a true threat (Chamberlain and Meuret 2017). The majority of the students attending the SUBH library workshops and participating in this survey reported experiencing related 'physical symptoms' with public speaking, some over a long period of time. Apart from the physical symptoms associated with 'fight or flight' response, the positioning of arms and hands may also be associated with anxiety in oral presentations (Tsang 2020). In interview findings from a mixed methods study of tertiary-level students, presenters were most concerned with their arms and hands (hand trembling) as signs of physical behaviour showing nervousness that could be seen by the audience (Tsang 2020).

In respect of the theme related to "'more practical support needed', university students in this study reported that they required more support for public speaking from the university. Suggestions were made in respect of more workshops, opportunities to practice public speaking, and teaching presentations as part of a course and incorporating public speaking classes into the timetable. These findings support previous evidence that found 89% of the students were interested in public speaking training and would appreciate this as an addition to their curriculum (Ferreira Marinho et al. 2017).

There is clear evidence on the benefits of support for students with a fear of public speaking that confirms one of the main themes identified in this survey related to 'more practical support needed'. Previous evidence relating to two UK universities, from Russell and Topham (2012), found that some students have identified various barriers to support, grouped under the themes of invisibility, stigmatisation and lack of confidence. A Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety questionnaire was administered at the beginning and end of a course in public speaking, related to student feelings towards giving a speech (Tse 2012). The findings revealed that teaching affective strategies to students appears to be an effective way of reducing anxiety in public speaking (Tse 2012). Previous research by Nash, Crimmins, and Oprescu (2016), indicated that the first-year students who completed pre- and post-public speaking exercises and assessments identified greater feelings

of satisfaction and less fear, indecision, and confusion in relation to public speaking and public speaking assessments. More recently, a study of undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university enrolled in an introductory public speaking course which included skills in public speaking supports the evidence for introductory communication courses (LeFebvre et al. 2020). The main findings indicated that almost half of the students reported less anxiety and diminished fears between an initial and subsequent final speech (LeFebvre et al. 2020).

The above identified research findings (LeFebvre et al. 2020; Nash, Crimmins, and Oprescu 2016; Tse 2012) were all positive with respect to introductory courses providing much-needed public speaking skills development for students during their time at university. However, findings from an earlier survey of employers and a compulsory first-year communication course (Clokie and Fourie 2016) found that the communication course may not provide students with sufficient employability skills with respect to adequate business communication, including oral and visual presentation skills. Clokie and Fourie (2016) suggest that this gap in communication skills could be addressed by increasing the industry relevance of courses and by including communication skills at all levels of university learning.

Further to the proposed benefits of practical support for public speaking was the theme related to 'practicing and preparation', where students reported which strategies they used to reduce their fear of public speaking. The importance of practice was frequently reported in this theme by many students. The importance of practice is widely known and advocated in respect of public speaking/ oral presentations.

However, a recently conducted mixed-method study (questionnaire (n = 211), and semi-structured interviews (n = 6) found opposing views on the importance of practice for improving public speaking skills and reducing fears (Tsang 2020). According to Tsang (2020), the two main reasons put forward by the interviewees were the audience effect and the effectiveness of the approaches adopted during practice/rehearsals. The audience response may override the efforts of the practice/rehearsal and the approach to practice may be ineffective as the student may be unaware of appropriate practice skills Tsang (2020). These are important findings, but as acknowledged by Tsang (2020), more interview participants were needed, including those from various backgrounds (e.g. secondary-school level; different ethnic backgrounds) to ensure findings were more generalisable to students in other contexts.

With respect to the recent COVID-19 pandemic and a move to online learning (Madzlan, Seng, and Kesevan 2020) found that the use of video blogs brought significant positive outcomes in reducing public-speaking anxiety among English language learners. However, a questionnaire of university students found that although online education has positive aspects, the negative elements were mainly related to a lack of communication and cooperation, as well as the general restriction of social contact in the academic context (Karalis and Raikou 2020).

Finally, this survey clearly identified through one of the key themes that apart from oral presentations, public speaking in general had a 'negative effective on students' university experience.' Students expressed concern relating to oral presentations, but also public speaking fear related to participating in discussions, asking questions, and fear obstructing their learning. These public speaking fears are supported by previously discussed research evidence that indicated student social anxiety and prevalence in university learning situations (Pörhölä, Almonkari, and Kunttu 2019; Kählke et al. 2019; Russell and Shaw 2009).

According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, student levels of mental distress, and low wellbeing are worsening in UK higher education and are high relative to other sections of the population (Thorley 2017). This negative effect of public speaking found in participants in this survey, may therefore be a factor or exacerbate issues related to student mental health and wellbeing.

Related to the overall findings of this qualitative survey and participants' fear of public speaking, was the overall negative response that participants gave to most of the open questions. Recent evidence by Tsang (2020) on tertiary students' fear of oral presentations found a clear relationship

between students' self-perceived competence in delivering oral presentations and their levels of anxiety in public speaking. Therefore, further to the above identified evidence for student public speaking support, is the immense potential value in boosting learners' perceptions of their own presentation delivery skills as a means of lowering their anxiety (Tsang 2020). Reassurance will be crucial to mitigate the fears identified and help students self-regulate when they engage in public speaking.

Linked to student self-perceived competence are excessive perfectionist tendencies which may also contribute to public speaking fear and negativity. An analysis of findings from a perfectionism scale completed by 41, 641 American, Canadian, and British university/college students (Curran and Hill 2017) indicated that young people are particularly demanding of themselves. This striving for perfection manifests itself in public speaking and is often the default position of many students, who focus on style and slickness of presentation over substance, which in turn may increase the pressure on themselves and increase their public speaking fear (Grieve 2020).

In respect of public speaking and the negative effect on the student experience, we have run university-wide library based SUBH workshops, for students with a fear of public speaking since 2015 (Grieve 2017). The main emphasis of these SUBH workshops and subsequently published book (Stand Up and Be Heard: Taking the Fear Out of Public Speaking at University; Grieve 2020), which differ from performance-based public speaking training, is the focus on authenticity. In the workshops, we focussed on the following components that enabled students to become authentic public speakers and reduce their public speaking fear, namely: being present in the moment; being yourself; awareness of vulnerability and letting go of perfection (Grieve 2020). An evaluation (n = 82) of the SUBH workshops and support for students was very positive with 87% of students feeling confident in reviewing and using the authentic public speaking strategies to help manage their fear of presentations/public speaking (Grieve 2018).

#### Limitations

As there were a disproportionate number of female (72%) compared to male (15%) students participating in this study, this may indicate a gender bias in recruitment. However, some of the evidence does indicate that there is a higher prevalence of public speaking fear among females compared to males (Perveen, Yamna, and Aleemi 2018; Ferreira Marinho et al. 2017). Linked to inclusivity in higher education, there is evidence that second language or international students face anxieties in oral presentations and public speaking (Kao and Craigie 2018). Given the high percentage of international students in UK higher education and the number attending the SUBH workshops, this group of students were not purposely included in this qualitative survey. Further limitations might be associated with only recruiting students with a fear of public speaking as opposed to a broader random sample of students in higher education, which may reduce transferability. An indication of reduced transferability in this study could be related to data analysis in the open question format as the data may not have been sufficiently rich to enable comparison with other related evidence (McClean et al. 2020).

The data for this study was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and subsequent changes to learning and teaching in the form of online and blended learning. Therefore, further research is required on student experiences of online public speaking and oral assessment in this new pedagogic landscape.

# **Conclusion and future directions**

Overall, this qualitative survey has increased the evidence base with respect to furthering the understanding of student fears of public speaking and adds to the growing evidence that a proportion of university students have a fear of public speaking, specifically oral presentations. This survey has identified six themes that ultimately highlight and include the central point that

public speaking may have a negative effect on students` university experience. Importantly, this negative effect on student experience related to public speaking, may be a contributing factor in student mental health and wellbeing issues. A key conclusion from this survey and in support of previous evidence, is the lack of and need for specific public speaking support for students with a public speaking fear in higher education. The data collected suggest that students may prefer more practical support in smaller group workshops in a supportive environment, with a focus on authenticity, letting go of perfection and substance over style as in the previously discussed SUBH workshops. Importantly, in respect of the need for public speaking support, the question was not asked in this survey on how students evaluated existing support, this warrants further investigation.

Adequate student support in public speaking would require communication and collaboration across an institution and involve input from wellbeing services, library services, study skills units, academic tutors and individual programmes. Further considerations should include the need for academics and module leaders to ensure they are aware of the fears that many students have around public speaking in general and assessed oral presentations.

Further research might include addressing student wellbeing with respect to including public speaking learning and teaching embedded in the curriculum. Further to the recruitment limitations of this survey in only including students with a fear of public speaking, future research might include a wider sample of students with and without public speaking fear. In respect of inclusivity and recognised in the evidence, international students with a fear of public speaking who attend UK higher education institutions should also be actively included in the future public speaking research.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

#### **Notes on contributors**

*R. Grieve* is a Senior Lecturer in Physiotherapy at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He facilitates workshops for students with a fear of public speaking, has regularly presented at national conferences and recently published a study skills book (Grieve 2020) on public speaking for students.

J. Woodley is a Senior lecturer in Radiography and is also Chair of ethics for the faculty research ethics committee, University of the West of England, Bristol. She has expertise in qualitative methodologies and has published work on medical ethics and presented in many international conferences.

S. E. Hunt is Library Academic Support Coordinator for Business and Law at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He writes and has presented at conferences within the field of environmental humanities, and has several publications in this field. He is currently editing a collection for Rowman and Littlefield.

A. McKay is Library Academic Support Coordinator for Health and Applied Sciences at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She works closely with librarians and lecturers to develop the academic skills of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

## **ORCID**

R. Grieve http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5285-6992 S. E. Hunt http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7291-1319

## References

Almonkari, M., and K. Kunttu. 2012. Korkeakouluopiskelijoiden jännittämiskokemusten yhteys opiskelukykyyn ["Social anxiety and study ability among higher education students"]. In M. Valo, A. Sivunen, L. Mikkola, & V. Laaksonen (Eds.), *Prologi, Puheviestinnän vuosikirja 2012* (pp. 7–27). Jyväskylä: Prologos ry.

American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: APA.



- Bippus, A. M., and J. A. Daly. 1999. "What Do People Think Causes Stage Fright?: Naïve Attributions about the Reasons for Public Speaking Anxiety." *Communication Education* 48 (1): 63–72. doi:10.1080/03634529909379153.
- Blanco, C., M. Okuda, C. Wright, D.S. Hasin, B.F. Grant, S.M. Liu, and M. Olfson. 2008. "Mental Health of College Students and Their Non-college-attending Peers." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 65 (12): 1429–1437. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.65.12.1429.
- Bodie, G.D. 2010. "A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts: Defining, Explaining, and Treating Public Speaking Anxiety." *Communication Education* 59 (1): 70–105. doi:10.1080/03634520903443849.
- Braun, R., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Chamberlain, S., and A. Meuret. 2017. "Fight-or-flight Response." In *The Sage Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology*, edited by A. Wenzel, 1481–1483. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Clokie, T., and E. Fourie. 2016. "Graduate Employability and Communication Competence." Business and Professional Communication Quarterly 79 (4): 442–463. doi:10.1177/2329490616657635.
- Cook, K.E. 2012. "Reliability Assessments in Qualitative Health Promotion Research." *Health Promotion International* 27 (1): 90–101. doi:10.1093/heapro/dar027.
- Curran, T., and A.P. Hill. 2017. "Perfectionism Is Increasing over Time: A Meta Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences from 1989 to 2016." *Psychological Bulletin* 145 (4): 410–429. doi:10.1037/bul0000138.
- Dwyer, K.K., and M. Davidson. 2012. "Is Public Speaking Really More Feared Than Death?" Communication Research Reports 29 (2): 99–107. doi:10.1080/08824096.2012.667772.
- Elo, S., M. Kääriäinen, O. Kanste, T. Pölkki, K. Utriainen, and H. Kyngäs. 2014. "Qualitative Content Analysis: A Focus on Trustworthiness." SAGE Open 4 (1): 1–10. doi:10.1177/2158244014522633.
- Ferreira Marinho, A.C., A. Mesquita de Medeiros, A.C. Côrtes Gama, and L. Caldas Teixeira. 2017. "Fear of Public Speaking: Perception of College Students and Correlates." *Journal of Voice* 31 (1): 7–11. doi:10.1016/j.jvoice.2015.12.012.
- Grieve, R. 2017. "Stand up and Be Heard (Fear of Presentations/public Speaking Workshop)." In *Presented at HEA Annual Conference 2017: Generation TEF: Teaching in the spotlight*, July. Manchester: Manchester University.
- Grieve, R. 2018. "An Overview and Evaluation of the 'Stand up and Be Heard' Workshops for Student Fear of Public Speaking." In *Presented at Higher Education Academy (HEA)*, NET2018, September. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Grieve, R. 2020. Stand up and Be Heard: Taking the Fear Out of Public Speaking at University. 1st ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Hancock, A.B., M.D. Stone, S.B. Brundage, and M.T. Zeigler. 2010. "Public Speaking Attitudes: Does Curriculum Make a Difference?" *Journal of Voice* 24 (3): 302–307. doi:10.1016/j.jvoice.2008.09.007.
- Joughin, G. 2007. "Student Conceptions of Oral Presentations." Studies in Higher Education 32 (3): 323–336. doi:10.1080/03075070701346873.
- Kählke, F., T. Berger, A. Schulz, H. Baumeister, M. Berking, R.P. Auerbach, R. Bruffaerts, P. Cuijpers, R.C. Kessler, and D. D. Ebert. 2019. "Efficacy of an Unguided Internet-based Self-help Intervention for Social Anxiety Disorder in University Students: A Randomized Controlled Trial." International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research 28 (2): e1766. doi:10.1002/mpr.1766.
- Kao, P.C., and P. Craigie. 2018. "Second or Foreign Language Public Speaking Anxiety in Higher Education." *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 1 (1): 72–77.
- Karalis, T., and N. Raikou. 2020. "Teaching at the Times of COVID-19: Inferences and Implications for Higher Education Pedagogy." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 10 (5): 479–493. doi:10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i5/7219.
- Kunttu, K., and Huttunen, T. 2009. "Student Health Survey 2008: A national survey among Finnish university students" (Research publications, 45). Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Student Health Service. http://www.yths.f/en/health\_information\_and\_research/research\_and\_publications/the\_fnnish\_student\_health\_survey.
- Kushner, M. 2004. Public Speaking For Dummies. 2nd ed. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- LeFebvre, L., L.E. LeFebvre, and M. Allen. 2018. "Training the Butterflies to Fly in Formation: Cataloguing Student Fears about Public Speaking." *Communication Education* 67 (3): 48–362. doi:10.1080/03634523.2018.1468915.
- LeFebvre, L., L.E. LeFebvre, M. Allen, M.M. Buckner, and D. Griffin. 2020. "Metamorphosis of Public Speaking Anxiety: Student Fear Transformation Throughout the Introductory Communication Course." *Communication Studies* 71 (1): 98–111. doi:10.1080/10510974.2019.1661867.
- Madzlan, N A., G.H. Seng, and H.V. Kesevan. 2020. "Use of Video Blogs in Alleviating Public Speaking Anxiety among ESL Learners." *Journal of Education and e-Learning Research* 7 (1): 93–99. doi:10.20448/journal.509.2020.71.93.99.
- McClean, S., I. Bray, N. De Viggiani, E. Bird, and P. Pilkington. 2020. *Research Methods for Public Health*. 1st ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- McCroskey, L.L., J. J. Teven, M.C. Minielli, and V.P.R. McCroskey. 2014. "James C. McCroskey's Instructional Communication Legacy: Collaborations, Mentorships, Teachers, and Students." *Communication Education* 63 (4): 283–307. doi:10.1080/03634523.2014.911929.
- Nash, G., G. Crimmins, and F. Oprescu. 2016. "If First-year Students are Afraid of Public Speaking Assessments What Can Teachers Do to Alleviate Such Anxiety?" Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 41 (4): 586–600. doi:10.1080/02602938.2015.1032212.



- Perveen, K., H. Yamna, and A.R. Aleemi. 2018. "Glossophobia: The Fear of Public Speaking in Female and Male Students of University of Karachi." *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies* 57 (16): 57–70. doi:10.46568/pjgs.v16i1.115.
- Petronzi, R., and D. Petronzi. 2020. "The Online and Campus (Oac) Model as A Sustainable Blended Approach to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: A Response to COVID-19." *Journal of Pedagogical Research* 4 (4): 498–507. doi:10.33902/JPR.2020064475.
- Pörhölä, M., M. Almonkari, and K. Kunttu. 2019. "Bullying and Social Anxiety Experiences in University Learning Situations." Social Psychology of Education 22 (3): 723–742. doi:10.1007/s11218-019-09496-4.
- Russell, G., and P. Topham. 2012. "The Impact of Social Anxiety on Student Learning and Well-being in Higher Education." *Journal of Mental Health* 21 (4): 375–385. doi:10.3109/09638237.2012.694505.
- Russell, G., and S. Shaw. 2009. "A Study to Investigate the Prevalence of Social Anxiety in A Sample of Higher Education Students in the United Kingdom." *Journal of Mental Health* 18 (3): 198–206. doi:10.1080/09638230802522494.
- Shah, S. Z. A. 2013. "The Use of Group Activities in Developing Personal Transferable Skills." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 50 (3): 297–307. doi:10.1080/14703297.2012.760778.
- Thorley, C. 2017. "Not by Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's Universities." *IPPR*. www.ippr.org/publications/not-by-degrees
- Tillfors, M., and T. Furmark. 2007. "Social Phobia in Swedish University Students: Prevalence, Subgroups and Avoidant Behaviour." Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology 42 (1): 79–86. doi:10.1007/s00127-006-0143-2.
- Tsang, A. 2020. "The Relationship between Tertiary-level Students' Self-perceived Presentation Delivery and Public Speaking Anxiety: A Mixed-methods Study." Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 45 (7): 1060–1072. doi:10.1080/02602938.2020.1718601.
- Tse, A.Y.H. 2012. "Glossophobia of University Students in Malaysia." *International Journal of Asian Social Science* 2 (11): 2061–2073.
- Vasileiou, K., J. Barnett, S. Thorpe, and T. Young. 2018. "Characterising and Justifying Sample Size Sufficiency in Interview-based Studies: Systematic Analysis of Qualitative Health Research over a 15-year Period". BMC Medical Research Methodology 18 (1): 1–18. doi:10.1186/s12874-018-0594-7.