



# Imposter Syndrome in the Classroom: What are the impacts on students' learning experiences and how can academic practice be improved?



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## Research design

This report drew from a thematic analysis of 9 qualitative semi-structured interview transcripts, focusing on student experiences of imposter syndrome at Durham University. Analysis was undertaken with an inductive approach, devising a set of codes and themes after analysing the data, which were used to identify trends within students' experiences of imposter syndrome.

## Introduction

This research project observes how imposter syndrome can shape students' experiences at university, both in academic and social settings, and what universities, including academic departments as well as support services, can do to mitigate these feelings.

This project takes a specific look at how imposter syndrome is shaped by linguistic factors, such as native languages and accents, and how these can create a sense of exclusion for students who do not fit into the hegemonic ideals of language within the elite university environment.

## Findings and discussion

Imposter syndrome can arise in settings where linguistic factors create hierarchies between people. Bourdieu's (1992) concept of linguistic capital explores how certain language forms have more value than others, with users of more prestigious forms having more access to certain resources and opportunities.

### Imposter syndrome for speakers of English as an additional language

- Some international students reported feeling that they were behind their peers who spoke English as their native language, reporting difficulties with assessment formats, and the specific types of language needed for written work.
- One student noted that, whilst these students were sufficiently qualified for their courses, they lacked confidence when using English to access support services.
- These communication barriers can impact emotional wellbeing, with these students reporting feelings of being 'behind' in conversations.

### Imposter syndrome due to having a regional accent

- Students reported a lack of accent diversity at Durham University, with regional (particularly Northern) accents being significantly outnumbered by those speaking with a RP accent.
- One student recalled some of her peers refusing to speak to her as a result of her Northern accent.
- This student used code-switching in order to assimilate with her peers; Elkins and Hanke (2018) define this term as a way for students to ease the tensions between their own social class identity, and the hegemonic student identity found within elite universities.

These factors often lead to imposter syndrome due to the feelings of isolation they invoke in students, who may feel that they don't belong with their peers due to speaking differently to them.

## How can we improve academic practice?

- Student support services need to be better informed about what imposter syndrome is, how to identify it, and how to support students facing it
- Steps should be taken to make these support services more accessible for international students, who may struggle to approach them due to language barriers
- Academic departments should help to build support networks for students struggling with imposter syndrome, for instance linking them with peer mentors who have faced similar issues

## Conclusion

The ways students use language to interact with one another contributes significantly to feelings of inclusion and exclusion within the university environment. This can lead to detrimental impacts on students' emotional wellbeing and self esteem, and so universities should adapt their practices in order to better support these students.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. and Thompson, J.B. (1992) *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Elkins, B. and Hanke, E. (2018) 'Code-Switching to Navigate Social Class in Higher Education and Student Affairs', *New directions for student services*, 2018(162), pp. 35–47.