

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

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Introduction

1.1 This research report outlines the experiences of imposter syndrome amongst a combination of undergraduate, post graduate and PhD students at a Russell Group university in the UK. Through exploring the definitions, experiences, and opinions of students, it explores the way in which experiences of imposter syndrome in higher education impact the student. The term imposter syndrome, otherwise known as imposter phenomenon, was first coined by Clance and Imes (1978) whilst discussing high achieving middle class women who had difficulties accepting their success. Imposter syndrome can be broadly defined as “the experience of persistently feeling like a fraud despite one’s achievements” (Meadbh Murray et al, 2023, p. 749), and is a phenomenon which can affect the educational experiences of university students. This report will outline how feelings of imposter syndrome in the classroom are complexly bound up with social class, accent, race, and participation in extra-curricular activities.

1.2 Until recently, academic research, and discussions of imposter syndrome in higher education has been limited; in recent years, this has increased as academia begins to raise awareness about this issue for students, however much more extensive research is still needed to mitigate this problem. One example of literature which offers an extremely comprehensive discussion of imposter syndrome in higher education is Addison, Breeze, and Taylor (2022) in ‘The Palgrave Handbook of Imposter Syndrome in Higher Education’, which discusses imposter syndrome through a plethora of different lenses such as gender, class, ethnicity and many more. Another example of this is Meadh Murray et al (2023) who discuss marginalized experiences of imposter syndrome in higher education, however this study is only related to undergraduate STEM students. These scholars offer alternative approaches to how we understand and conceptualise imposter syndrome, moving the focus away from an individualized frame which may unintentionally pathologise a person, to a wider contextual account of imposter syndrome as ‘public feeling’ (Breeze, 2018).

The findings and discussion of this research report divide the topic into six subtopics: grades, mental health, social class, extra curriculans, accent and race. When it comes to literature around grades and imposter syndrome, there is a significant gap in research. Both Chamberlin, Yasué and Chiang (2023) and Bickerdale (2016) discuss the ways in which having a negative perception of grades at university can affect students. However, there is a lack of available literature which discusses grades and imposter syndrome; therefore, there is extensive discussion around grades causing stress at university, however a lack of awareness of why this is. Similarly, when it comes to the topic of mental health, academics extensively discuss the way in which mental health problems can have negative impacts on students in

the context of university, however without relating to imposter syndrome. One example of literature which does do this well is Pakozdy et al (2024) who used questionnaires to investigate the relationship between imposter syndrome and happiness, finding that the two are negatively correlated. However, this study, alongside most discussions around mental health in higher education, comes from the discipline of psychology rather than sociology.

There are rich amounts of research available on social class and imposter syndrome which this research aims to support and further, for example that of Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022) and Mountford-Brown (2022) who discuss the experiences of working class students in higher education; these scholars report the ways in which aspects of identity led to a sense of unease in certain places and triggered experiences of imposter syndrome. Related to this topic is accent, which is not as extensively discussed in academia in relation to imposter syndrome; the main example of this which stands out is the discussion of Addison and Mountford (2015) which highlights the way in which students equate their accent to feelings of belonging at university. However, a significant gap in research relating social class/accent and imposter syndrome is discussions around code switching for working-class students. Code switching can be defined as when an individual changes their behaviour to be more accepted into a dominant culture (Wright-Mair, Ramos and Passano, 2023). The topic of code switching for students of colour has been discussed by Wright-Mair, Ramos and Passano (2023), however this is also something which is experienced by working class students.

Both the topics of race and extra-curricular participation relating to imposter syndrome are absent in literature. Whilst there are some comprehensive discussions of experiences of students of colour with imposter syndrome, for example that of Meadhbh Murray (2023), Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022) and Wright-Mair, Ramos and Passano (2023) in particular, this research seems to focus on ethnically minoritised students who are native to their university country, without shedding light on the experiences of international students. Furthermore, most of the research which appeared relating race, higher education and imposter syndrome seemed to focus on faculty members, rather than students. When it comes to discussions of how imposter syndrome intersects with engagement in extra-curricular activities, there is an extreme lack of literature; whilst there is extensive discussion from Jackson and Tomlinson (2021), Winstone et al (2022) and Buckley and Lee (2021) about how engagement can positively impact university experience, this has only been briefly mentioned in relation to imposter syndrome by Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022).

1.3 Overall, whilst some of the topics identified in this research report have been extensively researched in relation to imposter syndrome, there are some which need further discussion to inform in more detail this research question. For example, whilst a lot of literature discusses experiences of imposter syndrome, there is a lack of discussion around the dangers of this phenomenon and how this can affect students soon and further down the line in their future endeavors, for example from unhealthy working habits to career prospects. Considering this, this report aims to further this existing research and discuss the way in which imposter syndrome impacts the learning experience of university students with a specific focus on social class and underrepresented groups, as well as offering recommendations to mitigate this problem.

Research question

2.1 This research report aims to answer the following question: What are the impacts of imposter syndrome on students' learning experiences and how can academic practice be improved?

2.2 More specifically, the research aims to explore how feelings of imposter syndrome in the classroom relate to social class, and by extension, other subtopics such as accent, race, and engagement in extra-curricular activities.

Research design

3.1 The analysis of this study was focused on data from an open-ended survey with responses from n=735 students from the same university at varying levels of study (undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD). Upon analysis, specific focus was afforded to the following questions:

- How do you understand and define imposter syndrome?
- Are there times, places or people that activate imposter syndrome in the university setting?
- In what way does imposter syndrome impact your learning experience?
- What recommendations could be proposed to University Senate to help make the problem of imposter syndrome more visible and to reduce the impacts of this phenomenon on students' learning experiences?

3.2 Data was analysed using an inductive and qualitative content analysis which were broadly coded and then organized thematically; 15 key themes were identified and were condensed down to the 6 themes by isolating categories with the highest frequency count. The data was then coded at a granular level using those 6 key themes to analyse how imposter syndrome impacts learning experiences, and to explore how academic practice can be improved.

Findings and discussion

4.1 In order to highlight the impacts of imposter syndrome in higher education using the themes and experiences most significant to students, data was split into the following six themes which will each be discussed separately: grades, mental health, social class, extra-curriculars, accent and race.

4.2 Students feeling defined by their grades, feeling fraudulent and unhealthy working habits

Students discussed the connection between grades and feelings of imposter syndrome; discourse around grades can lead to imposter syndrome, as well as imposter syndrome leading to discourse around grades. For example, receipt of grades, whether they be positively or negatively perceived, can lead to imposter syndrome as students do not believe in themselves when they achieve good grades, therefore they feel like a fraud, activating imposter syndrome. Equally, if a student feels imposter syndrome, this can lead to them feeling demotivated and therefore grades begin to decline. Therefore, imposter syndrome in higher education and discourse around grades seem to relate together forming a vicious circle.

The most common topic which appeared in students' discussion of grades surrounding imposter syndrome was the idea of feeling like a fraud. Many participants reported feeling as if they are a fraud or they do not deserve to be where they are due to a multitude of reasons, for example feeling as though they only got accepted into university by a stroke of luck, feeling as though they have tricked the marker into giving them a good grade or they are just being generous because it is their first year, feeling as though good feedback is just a lie to soften the blow, and constantly waiting to be exposed as 'not smart enough to be at university' as their luck has run out. This can be exemplified by quotations from the survey from students who feel like their grades and success at university is fraudulent. One student stated:

Even the satisfaction of receiving good grades can be tainted by thoughts that I am somehow pretending my way through. (Female, undergraduate 2nd year, first-generation scholar)

Another wrote:

Every time I write an essay, I wonder how much of my work is considered "my work". Am I just hiding behind the words of people smarter than me? (Female, postgraduate taught, not a first-generation scholar)

Students also discussed the impacts of COVID-19 on their university education, and how this caused imposter syndrome. In the 2020 academic year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic students did not sit their exams and were instead awarded center assessed grades submitted by teachers which then decided whether they were admitted into university (Bhopal and Myers, 2023). Following this, students have reported feelings of imposter syndrome, as they feel as if they did not deserve the grades they were awarded, and subsequently that they do not deserve their place at university.

When I was joining [university], I felt intimidated by the people that got in. I probably got predicted higher grades because of COVID-19 so I felt I shouldn't have got into [university]. (Female, undergraduate 2nd year, not a first-generation scholar)

Following on from the idea of students feeling like a fraud in relation to their grades, students also reported the way in which their imposter syndrome led to them feeling defined by their grades at university. Participants reported feeling as though they were inferior to others and others look down on them because their grades are not as impressive and feeling personally targeted by negative feedback as this completely dictates their feelings of self-worth. For example:

Whenever I get a bad grade, I see it as proof of my inadequacy. (Female, undergraduate 2nd year, not a first-generation scholar)

Every time I submit work, in the space between me doing it and getting my marks back, I become convinced this is finally going to be the piece of work that proves I'm too dumb to be here. (Male, level of study not provided, not a first-generation scholar)

This idea of students feeling defined by their grades has been confirmed in previous studies, as in their mixed methods study Chamberlin, Yasué and Chiang (2023) found that as well as being a huge source of

stress and anxiety for students, discourse around grades led to them questioning their competence and a declining sense of self-worth.

Finally, the working habits of students is another important topic which appeared relating to grades and imposter syndrome. When analysing how the working habits of students is affected by grades and imposter syndrome, it became apparent that this can lead to two different responses: overworking to an unhealthy extent in order to beat the feelings of imposter syndrome that tell students they aren't good enough, and procrastinating and underworking because they feel as if there is no point if they are just going to fail anyway. For example, some students expressed ways in which overworking negatively affected them:

I ruined my Christmas holidays in preparation for my January progress tests in Chemistry as I did not believe that I was able to achieve a high grade. This culminated in a deterioration of my familial relationships and meant I had to go to the GP as I was so stressed. (Male, undergraduate 1st year, not a first-generation scholar)

As well as ways in which imposter syndrome can lead to underworking:

Instead of going 'oh well I can just keep trying' I just skip to 'I'm too stupid to be here and I'll never be good enough'. It makes it difficult to be resilient and pick myself up after a setback. (Female, undergraduate 1st year, not a first-generation scholar)

Both underworking and overworking due to grades and imposter syndrome can have negative impacts on students. For example, Bickerdale (2016) discusses the way in which using 'cramming' as a study method can negatively impact academic success. Furthermore, when discussing the way in which imposter syndrome leads to unhealthy working habits, students highlighted the ways in which this can lead to strains on their relationships and mental decline, as unhealthy working habits can lead to a lack of socialization.

Overall, it is evident that discourse surrounding grades and imposter syndrome can significantly negatively affect students' learning experiences and wellbeing. This is due to ways in which imposter syndrome leads to students having a negative self-perception of being fraudulent or not good enough, which can lead to unhealthy working habits which affects their studies and therefore learning experience, not to mention wider wellbeing.

4.3 Mental health, anxiety to participate and lack of attendance

According to the survey, mental health issues are a significant impact of imposter syndrome in education. The most common topic discussed surrounding this is anxiety felt by students to speak up, ask for help or contribute as imposter syndrome convinces them that they are going to be exposed for not being good enough or make a mistake. This can then lead to detrimental effects on studies as students are not getting the most out of their degree and not gaining access to a support network due to imposter syndrome and anxiety. This idea of imposter syndrome being related to mental health has been evidenced on previous studies, for example using surveys Pakozdy et al (2024) found that happiness was negatively correlated with feelings of imposter syndrome.

The first significant issue which arose when analysing discussions of imposter syndrome relating to mental health was the issue of attendance and motivation amongst students. Students highlighted that due to feelings of imposter syndrome in higher education, they have experienced mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. Subsequently, this has affected their motivation and attendance at university because they feel as if it is either pointless to attend as they are going to fail, or it is too stressful. For example:

University has really negatively impacted my self-confidence and mental health on the whole. I often think I should just drop out because I don't deserve to be here and it's clearly not the right place for me because I don't fit in with the other students (especially academically). I stopped going to lectures because they made me feel so bad. (Female, undergraduate 2nd year, first-generation scholar)

From this, it is evident that imposter syndrome can have detrimental effects on mental health and therefore learning experience for students as they feel less motivated, procrastinate work, and do not attend university. This is supported by Jochmann et al (2024), who discusses the way in which procrastination can lead to depression and anxiety symptoms as well as high levels of stress.

Another way in which imposter syndrome can lead to mental health problems for students is the receipt of negative feedback, which in turn causes students to compare themselves to others. Participants reported how negative feedback can lead to a sense of depression which exacerbates the feeling that they do not belong and an intense fear of failure. This can lead to students comparing themselves to others, which has a negative impact on self-esteem, as students feel like they do not fit in and as though they are not capable, which fosters mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. For example:

[Imposter syndrome] bolsters my other mental health conditions and convinces me that I shouldn't be here and that I'm a fake and it'll all come out when I fail this degree and disappoint everyone around me. I feel it every day and it's paralyzing. (Female, postgraduate research, not a first-generation scholar)

[Imposter syndrome] makes me feel like I have to be working all the time, if I am I not working then I deserve to fail. Sometimes makes me more scared of learning than enjoying it. (Male, postgraduate research, first-generation scholar)

Finally, the most common issue surrounding imposter syndrome and mental health discussed in the survey was anxiety. This was discussed in detail, as students reported passing up opportunities due to anxiety, struggling to leave the house, feeling an inability to achieve their full potential, an inability to continue working, avoiding things such as meetings with supervisors as they lead to anxiety, avoiding certain places, and not speaking up for fear or being exposed. For example:

It brings anxiety which then holds me back from achieving my full potential, as I am too busy overcoming anxiety to actually do the work. (Female, PhD, not a first-generation scholar)

This idea of imposter syndrome causing anxiety amongst students has been evidenced in previous literature. For example, Pakozdy et al (2024) found that students who reported higher feelings of imposter syndrome are more likely to feel anxiety surrounding academics.

Considering the issues discussed of attendance and motivation, comparison of self to others, and anxiety around academics, it is undeniable that within the topic of mental health, imposter syndrome significantly affects the learning experience of students. This is evident most significantly from discussions around attendance and participation, as if students do not make the most out of the resources their university make available to them, one can only assume that they will not be as successful in their academics. However more importantly, it is evident that imposter syndrome significantly affects students' wellbeing, which is a topic much more pertinent than academic success.

4.4 Social class and differing experiences determining sense of belonging

Unfortunately, when considering social class, admissions to university in the UK are far from equal. Students from working class backgrounds and state school students are significantly underrepresented in higher education in comparison to their upper/middle class and private school student counterparts (Boliver, 2013). Considering this, discussions of imposter syndrome around social class tend to circulate around feelings of belonging, a lack of understanding of the university lifestyle (i.e., hidden curriculum) and feeling behind compared to others due to differing life experiences.

Firstly, when participants highlighted social class as a factor leading to imposter syndrome, one significant topic which arose was discussions around privileged experiences. Students reported feeling a sense of imposter syndrome in relation to previous experiences as working-class students may not have been as fortunate to experience certain things, for example culturally valued travels, private school, unpaid internships, and expensive academic opportunities. Because of this, students reported feeling deprived of experiences due to a deprived background. This idea of students feeling imposter syndrome due to a lack of privileged experiences is reminiscent of the hidden curriculum, which is the idea that certain values, behaviours and experiences possessed by more privileged students lead to them reaping rewards (Nami, Marsooli and Ashouri, 2014). Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022) support this idea of working-class students being disadvantaged by the hidden curriculum, as they highlight that they are not able to draw on cultural capital in the same way that other students can. Furthermore, Mountford-Brown (2022) highlights the difference in resources at university between working class and upper/middle class students who have had family go through the same experiences, and therefore have more of a sense of belonging. For example:

[I specifically feel imposter syndrome around] people who have a history of family who have attended university or appear to have connections within the university or I am perceiving to be experiencing more success than me. (Female, undergraduate 1st year, first generation scholar)

When I think of how my parents couldn't go university I feel guilty and cry (Female, undergraduate 1st year, first generation scholar)

Another aspect of university highlighted by participants which led to imposter syndrome through the lens of social class was university lifestyle. Many students reported feeling a sense of imposterism as

university lifestyle is reminiscent of upper/middle class culture which can be quite uncomfortable for some students who are unfamiliar with the hidden curriculum which accompanies these activities. An example of this is balls and formal events: the price of these experiences and language used, such as around networking events made some students feel like imposters. This highlights a divide between students who feel at ease in these situations, and students who do not, leading to a powerful sense of imposter syndrome. For example:

The university is so elite honestly. Gowned formals, overpriced balls. Makes me feel too poor to be here. (Female, undergraduate 2nd year, not a first-generation scholar)

The exclusionary atmosphere of university has been discussed in previous literature, for example Meadhbh Murray et al (2023) discusses how the exclusionary atmosphere of university can have negative impacts on working class students as they must do extensive emotional work to navigate the feelings of imposterism which stem from this.

Furthermore, the most significant impact of social class and imposter syndrome discussed by students is their sense of belonging. Many students reported feeling a lack of a sense of belonging because of their working-class backgrounds. For example, because of having different familial experiences or structures which others cannot relate to, feeling as though you must change your mannerisms to seem more middle class to belong, feeling unwelcome amongst private school culture, and experiencing negative connotations of where you are from offer. For example:

[The university could be improved by having] more local students from the North East at a university in the North East... there are plenty of well-deserving students locally who should be here. (Male, PhD, first-generation scholar)

I will only go to locals' bars as I am a local myself and whenever I end up bumping into students, they always have something to say about me being northern and working class. (Female, undergraduate 1st year, first-generation scholar)

This idea of experiencing a lack of belonging due to social class has been previously evidenced, as participants in the study conducted by Meadhbh Murray et al (2023) highlighted feeling a lack of belonging due to class and accent and feeling as if they are not intelligent enough to be at university. This study also highlighted an underrepresentation of black working-class men in higher education, which led to students feeling as if they have to code switch to belong.

Students also reported feeling a lack of belonging at university because they were accepted due to a contextual offer. Contextual offers are a way in which universities are attempting to become more inclusive, as they consider applicants social backgrounds when making decisions on who to admit and what grades to expect from students (Boliver et al, 2017). Therefore, the idea of contextual offers is to welcome students from varying backgrounds into higher education, therefore it is incredibly disappointing to find that this can be a source of shame for students and lead to them lacking a sense of belonging.

Having received a contextual offer based on postcode it's hard not to feel out of place compared to people who had full, usual offers. (Female, undergraduate 1st year, not a first-generation scholar)

[I feel] like I don't deserve to be here because my contextual offer made it easier for me compared to other people. (Female, undergraduate 1st year, not a first-generation scholar)

Overall, students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in higher education have reported experiencing imposter syndrome in relation to social class as they feel they do not belong in the university environment, whether this be because they have had different experiences previously in life, or they are not comfortable with some of the events of university lifestyle. From the participant responses to the survey, it is evident that this can have a negative impact of the learning experiences of students, because as they begin to form a negative self-concept of their social class identity, they do not enjoy or contribute to their university experience to the best of their ability.

4.5 Extra curriculars: Participation in sports and societies

When discussing experiences with extra-curriculars at university, students have reported that they do not engage in extra-curricular activities as they exacerbate feelings of imposter syndrome. Sadly, only one person reported that their sport or society helps them feel better and combat feelings of imposterism.

Many students highlighted that they refrained from engaging in extra-curricular activities because they felt as though they do not belong, they are not good enough, have a lack of ability or do not fit in because some sports are typically 'middle class'. Students highlighted that this may be due to a lack of experience as state schools did not offer training for certain things or opportunities to be in leadership positions, therefore they feel as if they cannot go for executive roles. For example:

Also, some societies or sports [can cause imposter syndrome]. Something like golf is intimidating because I've never had the opportunity to play before, but I know others will have because of their background. (Male, undergraduate 2nd year, first-generation scholar)

Sports teams can be quite monocultural with limited diversity. (Female, undergraduate 1st year, first-generation scholar)

Therefore, it is evident that feelings of imposter syndrome can extend to sports and societies and lead to a lack of participation. Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022) discuss an example of this, highlighting the ways in which even students who are passionate about their sport may be unable to participate due to financial reasons, which can foster feelings of imposter syndrome and lead to a lack of belonging.

Lack of engagement in extra-curriculars can be detrimental to the learning experiences and future prospects of university students. For example, Jackson and Tomlinson (2021) discuss the ways in which participation in extra-curricular activities can enhance employability. Furthermore, Winstone et al (2022) and Buckley and Lee (2021) highlight key skills and characteristics which can be enhanced through involvement in extra-curriculars, for example self-confidence, teamwork, stress levels, belonging, and

the creation of new friends. Some of these things become more difficult for students when they do not engage in opportunities such as extra-curriculars, for example:

[Imposter syndrome] stopped me making friends with people on my course and made me much less confident with my abilities, I also chose not to do any extra-curricular activities. (Male, undergraduate 2nd year, not a first-generation scholar)

On the surface, the lack of participation in extra-curricular activities amongst university students may seem trivial. However, when coupled with feelings of imposterism, this can have detrimental impacts on the learning experience of students as they do not make the most out of the resources available to them at university. This can then cause a decline in socialization, and a lack of ability to develop key skills which increase employability and future prospects. It is also important to consider the social background aspect of this issue, as many students reported that they feel imposter syndrome and do not participate in extra-curriculars due to their lower socioeconomic background, which highlights that there is an extreme need for sports and societies at university to work on their environments and inclusivity.

4.6 Stereotypes around accent affecting belonging and participation

According to the survey, another key topic which fosters feelings of imposter syndrome in higher education is accent. This topic is intertwined with social class therefore there are some significant overlaps in discussion, as Levon, Sharma and Ilbury (2022) highlight how accent is arguably the most significant signal of socioeconomic status. Accent is a key topic of discussion in education in general, an example of this being due to educational speech codes. Bernstein (1962) discussed the ways in which accents, and manner of speaking can influence academic success, distinguishing those who speak the 'elaborated code' as more likely to succeed than those who speak the 'restricted code'. Overall, accent can impact feelings of imposter syndrome through students' sense of belonging and participation, as discussed below.

Similarly to discussions around social class and imposter syndrome, when discussing accent one of the most significant issues identified was students lacking a sense of belonging due to their accent. When discussing accent in the survey, students highlighted that they lacked a sense of belonging because they have a Northern accent, therefore they do not speak in Received Pronunciation and because of this felt as though they are limited in vocabulary and looked down upon because they do not have a Southern accent. Similar ideas were also identified by international students, who reported feeling as though they were judged because of their international accent. Participants highlighted that imposter syndrome around their accent leads them to believe that they must change how they speak to be successful. For example:

Going to tutorials where everyone speaks in the same accent to each other but different to me. They're all usually much more well-spoken and went to grammar or private school and it makes me think there's no way my crappy high school prepared me for this. (Female, undergraduate 2nd year, not a first-generation scholar)

This idea of students feeling as though they have less value because of the way they speak has been evidenced in previous literature. Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022) highlight how students felt as if

they were marked out as different and not as valuable as their peers because they do not have an accent reminiscent of the Queen's English. Similarly, Levon, Sharma and Ilbury (2022) discuss stereotypes around the Queen's English and Received Pronunciation, highlighting that there is a hierarchy of accent prestige which can unfortunately lead to students feeling anxieties about their ability to succeed due to their Northern accents. Because of this lack of belonging, many students have reported that they feel as if they must attempt to change their accent to fit in or be successful. This has also been highlighted by both Mountford-Brown (2022) and Addison and Mountford (2015) who discussed the ways in which some students may adapt their accent to seem more intellectual or to be more easily understood.

Another significant aspect of imposter syndrome which is impacted by accent is participation at university. Students have highlighted that they did not feel as if they can contribute to seminars for fear of being judged due to their accent, as they equate having a Northern accent as being less intelligent and a Southern accent as being more coherent and eloquent. For example:

[Imposter syndrome leads to] self-doubt and over-working; anxious about speaking in seminars and tutorials in case I sound unintelligent or because I don't have a 'posh' accent. (Female, undergraduate 3rd year, first-generation scholar)

It makes me feel nervous to participate in lectures because I fear that I do not sound as articulate as other people that were privately educated. (Female, undergraduate 3rd year, not a first-generation scholar)

Considering this, it is evident that stereotypes around Northern and Southern accents can lead to intense feelings of imposter syndrome which restrict students' abilities to participate. Addison and Mountford (2015) discuss this, highlighting the misleading and inaccurate assumption that certain accents, specifically a Northeastern Geordie dialect, can signify a lack of value in higher education.

Therefore, based on accent, a characteristic which is inextricably linked with social class, students feel imposter syndrome, as they are convinced that they do not belong, and therefore do not participate or speak in university environments when they get the opportunity to. Overall, in a similar way that social class and mental health leads to a lack of use of available resources, as does accent, therefore having a detrimental impact on learning experiences.

4.7 Race, ethnicity and student experiences with racism leading to imposter syndrome

Ethnic minority students are strikingly underrepresented in university admissions, specifically in Old and Russell Group universities (Boliver, 2013). Therefore, it is unsurprising that in the survey responses, students reported feeling imposter syndrome due to assumptions made because they may not be white or are perceived as an international student.

From the data analysed, students highlighted experience as an ethnic minority international student as a source of imposter syndrome within their educational experiences. Participants highlighted that this manifests in many ways, for example others have underestimated them or assumed they are not as

intelligent as international students are stereotyped to have a poor English proficiency and being stereotyped and discriminated against from the outset of people hearing their name. For example:

This worry that the university perceives me as an international student who might have less interest in their subject/has poor understanding of English has stuck with me throughout university and reflects whenever I observe my feedback. (Female, undergraduate 3rd year, not a first-generation scholar)

Participants also highlighted the racism experienced as ethnic minorities in higher education, and how this can lead to imposter syndrome through lacking a sense of belonging. Students discussed that they felt a lack of belonging as they were often the only person of their race in the classroom, which created imposterism as they felt as if they were only accepted for tokenistic reasons. This is exacerbated by racism in the university community, for example in clubs and societies, as well as through struggles being published due to not being Western. For example:

[The university could be improved by having] more black students around really. That would help me feel less alone and out of place. (Female, postgraduate research, first-generation scholar)

The power imbalance between the West (which I'd define as 'white'ism in the West) and the rest, especially in the context of publishing and media, so that the struggle to be published makes you feel irrelevant. (Female, PhD, not a first-generation scholar)

I often feel imposter syndrome when I am the only brown person in a room full of white people. (Female, PhD, first-generation scholar)

This idea of tokenism amongst ethnic minority students at university is supported by Meadhbh Murray et al (2023) and Addison Stephens Griffin (2022) who highlight that this is a legitimate concern for some students who believe they were only accepted to university because of their ethnicity. Addison Stephens Griffin (2022) and Di Miceli (2024) also discuss the lack of visibility and diversity in higher education, as many students report not seeing other people like themselves in the university environment which can amplify feelings that they do not belong. Furthermore, Wright-Mair, Ramos and Passano (2023) discuss the experiences of Latinx students of imposter syndrome in HE, highlighting the ways in which they combat their imposter syndrome by 'code switching' (changing their mannerisms and how they act) to feel a sense of belonging.

Overall, it is incredibly saddening and disappointing to see the negative ways in which a lack of ethnic diversity in higher education can impact students due to imposter syndrome. Here, the main way in which imposter syndrome has been related to race is through a lack of a sense of belonging. Although this may not directly impact a students' learning, it certainly impacts their learning experience, as if a student feels as though they must change who they are to function effectively in the university environment, it is evident that they are not receiving an education which is tailored or organic to them.

Recommendations

5.1 One of the most interesting and important questions the survey asked participants was if they had any recommendations on how to improve support and reduce the impact of imposter syndrome on learning experience. Based on these responses, and the findings in the study, three main ways to address this were identified: academic support, increased representation, and actively addressing the problem.

5.2 Actively addressing imposter syndrome

Unsurprisingly, the main suggestion from participants on how to reduce feelings of imposter syndrome was to tackle the problem head on and break the stigma of this phenomenon. One way in which this could be done is through something such as a lecture series on imposter syndrome open to students. This could be facilitated by university staff who have experienced the phenomenon, or even through guest speakers. Students said they would like to see this, as hearing the experiences of role models and people in a position of power would make others feel less alone in their imposter syndrome. Another way in which educators could help is through having open discussions around imposter syndrome in the first lecture of each year and signposting support, as often students will not know that what they are experiencing is imposter syndrome until the topic is brought up.

Furthermore, something which could greatly improve students' learning experience is using workshops and training specific to imposter syndrome. For example, often before coming to university students must complete training courses on things such as health and safety, consent, etc. therefore offering a training course which discusses imposter syndrome would be beneficial to equip the student before they even arrive at university. This could also be done in the form of in-person workshops throughout the academic year for those who are struggling, or even through a mentoring programme specific to the phenomenon.

5.3 Student support

From an academic perspective on student support, this study revealed many ways in which practice can be improved to reduce the impact of imposter syndrome on learning experience. One specific aspect which many students reported would be beneficial was around feedback and marking criteria. Participants expressed that if the marking criteria was clearer, this may help mitigate feelings of imposter syndrome as it would help students to understand why they achieved highly, or equally not so high. Furthermore, students expressed that feedback which is framed in a more positive and constructive way would be a great factor in countering the imposter syndrome voice which invades when reading negative feedback. Perhaps training everyone who marks assignments in more detail on marking policies and constructive criticism would give students more consistency in their feedback, allowing them to see how they can improve. Students highlighted that in both feedback and lectures in general, the vocabulary used by educators can often lead to imposter syndrome, for example phrases such as 'obviously' and 'you should know this'. Therefore, training teaching staff to use less vocabulary which presumes knowledge would also be helpful.

Another key issue which was identified by participants was the way in which imposter syndrome leads to them refraining from asking questions and reaching out for help with academics when it is needed.

Therefore, students expressed that one way this could be assisted could be through the ability to submit anonymous questions about assignments. Furthermore, if educators simply allocated time in lectures and heavily encouraged asking questions, this may help students to feel more confident reaching out.

Participants also highlighted that imposter syndrome was often activated when they had problems adjusting to the academic style of university. For example, many students coming to university may have never referenced before or may not be familiar with how to write academically, or how to read sources effectively. Therefore, offering free classes which are advertised and easy to access throughout the academic year teaching students how to reference, how to use software such as Excel, etc. would be incredibly beneficial for some students. Another recommendation which would again help with the jump from school to university may be discussions from academic staff around setting realistic goals. Participants have highlighted that imposter syndrome is often activated at university because they are getting significantly lower scores than what they achieved previously at school. Therefore, having open discussions with students around realistic goal setting is incredibly important, as students should be made aware that not achieving incredibly high scores is very normal after the jump to university.

5.4 Representation

As discussed in most of the findings and discussion of this study, there is an extreme lack of representation in higher education which exacerbates imposter syndrome for minority students. One way in which students could be offered support to help with this is using clubs and societies, for example the facilitation and encouragement of student societies which celebrate minority students. Students have noted that some societies of this nature do exist, however they stated that whilst these are helpful, they are not advertised enough so a greater push of these clubs at events such as fresher's week and email notices throughout the year would be helpful. Some students have reported that even clubs such as this are too extraverted – perhaps a way to receive all the information and support without having to go to the meetings could be a great way to be inclusive of all personality types.

Another great way in which representation in higher education could be improved is through changing the way in which students are informed about contextual offers. Boliver et al (2017) discusses the flaws in the contextual offer system, highlighting that often universities do not inform students how indicators for contextual offers work. This creates a barrier to access for some students, as they may not know that they could benefit from the contextual offer process. Furthermore, this transparency and information around why contextual offers exist would also be beneficial to students who were admitted to university through a contextual offer. This is because many students reported that they feel they were only admitted to university because of tokenistic reasons, therefore more discourse around why contextual offers exist may help students who feel imposter syndrome surrounding this topic.

Conclusions

6.1 Overall, this study has found that amongst the students who participated in the survey, imposter syndrome mainly manifests through discourse around grades, mental health problems, social class, lack of engagement in extra-curricular activities, stereotypes around accent, and lack of representation for ethnic minority students. An analysis of these themes clearly reveals that the main ways in which this

affects learning experience is through students not making the most of the resources available to them because imposter syndrome restricts the extent to which they participate. Wider literature has suggested that this can have lasting effects on the lives of students who experience imposter syndrome, as they lack the ability to develop key skills available to them in the university environment. Considering these problems, there are many ways in which higher education institutions can improve practice to reduce the impact of imposter syndrome on learning experience, for example through academic support for students, greater work around representation and tackling the problem head on. It is incredibly important to facilitate discussions around imposter syndrome as it affects countless students studying at university, therefore this study implores higher education institutions to take on board the topics and recommendations discussed. It is paramount that all students from all walks of life are able to make the most out of their learning experiences and are not held back by imposter syndrome.

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