

IMPOSTER SYNDROME IN HIGHER EDUCATION

What are the impacts of imposter syndrome on students' learning experience and how can academic practice be improved?

This research aims to explore how feelings of imposter syndrome in the classroom manifest in minoritised students, for example through characteristics such as social class, accent and race.

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INTRODUCTION

This study draws upon experiences of imposter syndrome amongst students at a Russell Group university in the UK to discuss how imposter syndrome in higher education impacts learning experience. Imposter syndrome can be broadly defined as “the experience of persistently feeling like a fraud despite one’s achievements” (Meadhbh Murray, 2023, p. 749), and is a phenomenon which can greatly affect the educational experiences of university students. The aim of this study was to 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.

METHODOLOGY

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). Specific focus was afforded to participants’ definitions of imposter syndrome, when their imposter syndrome activates, how this impacts their learning experience and their recommendations to reduce the impact of this phenomenon on learning experience. 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

In order to analyse this topic using the most important themes identified by 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.

According to the survey, discourse around grades and imposter syndrome formed a vicious circle. For example, receipt of grades can lead to imposter syndrome as students do not believe in themselves when they achieve good grades, therefore they feel like a fraud. 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.

When mental health was discussed, the most common topic discussed surrounding this is anxiety about being exposed as a fraud, leading to a lack of participation and students not making the most of the resources available to them. This idea of imposter syndrome being related to mental health has been evidenced in previous studies, for example using surveys Pakozdy et al (2024) found that happiness was negatively correlated with feelings of imposter syndrome.

Unfortunately, when considering social class, admissions to university in the UK are far from equal. Students from lower class backgrounds and state school students are significantly underrepresented in higher education (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, and feeling behind compared to others due to differing life experiences. For example, one student stated: “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)

When discussing experiences with extra-curriculars at university, students have reported that they did not engage in extra-curricular activities as they exacerbate feelings of imposter syndrome. For example, students felt as if they did not fit in because some sports are typically ‘middle class’ or they simply cannot afford it. Sadly, only one person reported that their sport or society helped them feel better and combatted feelings of imposterism.

The topic of accent 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). Overall students reported that accent can impact feelings of imposter syndrome through students’ sense of belonging and participation, specifically students who have Northern accents, as they feel that this marks them out as less intelligent than others.

Lastly, 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, leading to them lacking a sense of belonging, and feeling as if they must code switch in order to belong (Wright-Mair, Ramos and Passano, 2023)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings in the study, three main ways to address this were identified: academic support, increased representation, and actively addressing the problem.

In terms of academic support, students highlighted that training educators to provide feedback which is positive and constructive with a clear marking policy would be helpful, as well as using less vocabulary which presumes knowledge. Students also highlighted that encouraging questions, for example through anonymous question boxes would greatly improve their confidence in academics. Academic staff could also help by offering free classes about topics such as how to reference, how to use excel, etc. in order to help students who struggled with the academic jump to university. When it comes to representation, the main way in which practice could be improved is through greater attention for clubs which celebrate minority students, and improvement to the structure of contextual offers. Lastly, many students recommended tackling the problem head on, through things such as workshops and training courses which are specific to imposter syndrome.

CONCLUSION

Overall, participants have highlighted that imposter syndrome mainly manifests through the following themes: grades, mental health, social class, extra-curriculars, accent and race.

An analysis of these themes reveals that this affects learning experience as students do not make the most of the resources available to them because imposter syndrome restricts the extent to which they participate.

Therefore this study implores higher education institutions to consider the recommendations discussed as it is paramount that all students from all walks of life are able to make the most out of their learning experiences.

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