

**LIDLAW LEADERSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT.**

**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

Imposter Syndrome (IS) is a psychological phenomenon wherein individuals experience pervasive feelings of self-doubt and fear of being exposed as frauds, despite evidence of their competence and accomplishments. This phenomenon can be particularly pronounced among students in higher education, where the pressures of academic performance, social integration, and cultural adaptation converge. Breeze, Addison, and Taylor (2022) offer a poignant reflection on this experience, pondering what imposterism looks and feels like. They describe a hybrid character—neither fully human nor entirely alien, embodying both monstrosity and vulnerability. This depiction resonates with the internal conflict of feeling out of place and self-loathing, akin to a lizard-like figure that is dangerous, disguised, and resistant.

This report investigates the manifestation of imposter syndrome among three international students at Durham University, focusing on how their non-native accents and cultural differences contribute to their feelings of inadequacy and sense of belonging. By examining the experiences of Student A, Student B, and Student C, this research report aims to elucidate the factors contributing to imposter syndrome and suggest ways in which Durham University can foster a more inclusive and supportive academic environment.

## **Understanding Imposter Syndrome**

### **Historical Context and Definition**

Imposter Syndrome was first conceptualised by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. Their seminal work focused on high-achieving women who, despite evident success, attributed their achievements to luck or external factors rather than their abilities. This self-doubt was compounded by a fear of being exposed as frauds (Clance & Imes, 1978). Since its introduction, the concept of imposter syndrome has expanded beyond its original focus to include a wider range of individuals. Recent research has deepened our understanding of its impact on various demographic groups, showing that it affects not only high-achieving women but also underrepresented groups such as racial minorities and international students (Cokley et al., 2013). Its core traits include persistent self-doubt, a sense of fraudulence, and the belief that success is undeserved.

### **Personal Definitions and Insights**

The interviews with the three students provided unique personal perspectives on imposter syndrome:

- Student A described imposter syndrome as "feeling particularly out of place with certain opportunities, when I really shouldn't feel like that." This definition highlights the emotional disconnect between actual achievements and self-perception, reflecting the essence of imposter syndrome.

- Student B characterised it as "feeling like you don't belong or you don't merit whatever you're getting, or you're not qualified for wherever you find yourself in." This viewpoint aligns with the established understanding of imposter syndrome, where individuals feel undeserving of their success, regardless of evidence to the contrary.
  
- Student C defined imposter syndrome as "the feeling that you're never good enough or you're not confident enough in your skills or abilities," noting that it "affects mainly women." This insight touches on the gendered nature of imposter syndrome, which disproportionately affects women, especially in male-dominated environments (Parkman, 2016).

These definitions underscore the personal and individualised nature of imposter syndrome, while also revealing common themes such as self-doubt, fear of failure, and the tendency to downplay achievements.

### **Experiences at Durham University**

Durham University is renowned for its academic excellence and competitive atmosphere. However, this environment can be particularly challenging for international students, who may face additional stressors that exacerbate imposter syndrome. The experiences of Student A, Student B, and Student C provide valuable insights into how various factors contribute to their feelings of inadequacy and lack of belonging.

- **Social and Cultural Differences**

International students often face significant challenges when adapting to the social and cultural norms of a new educational environment. Student A, who is both an international student and a racial minority, reported feeling profoundly out of place due to cultural differences and the lack of peers with similar backgrounds. They noted that certain childhood experiences and cultural references common among their British peers were unfamiliar, creating barriers to social integration. This sense of cultural alienation significantly contributed to their imposter syndrome, as they felt perpetually trying to fit into a culture that was not their own.

This phenomenon is not unique to individual experiences but is reflective of broader patterns observed in academia. Research supports this observation, demonstrating that minority students in predominantly white institutions frequently experience feelings of inferiority and self-doubt due to a lack of visible role models and cultural representation (Cokley et al., 2013). Such experiences align with the concept of intersectionality, a term introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), which describes the multiple forms of discrimination faced by individuals with intersecting identities, such as Black working-class women. Crenshaw's framework helps to explain how the compounded impact of race and gender can exacerbate feelings of imposter syndrome.

The white male perspective often dominates academia, further marginalising women of colour. When these women challenge established norms, they are frequently not seen as the 'typical scholar in training,' resulting in a constant struggle to redefine their academic identity and prove their legitimacy. This battle reflects a broader issue within academia where exclusionary practices and insensitive comments contribute

to a sense of isolation and imposter syndrome among Black women and other minority groups (Hewertson and Tissa, 2022, p.22). Student A's experience, therefore, is emblematic of the broader struggles faced by minority students, underscoring the need for greater cultural representation and support within academic institutions.

- **.Academic Pressure and Independence**

The academic environment at Durham University, characterised by high expectations and independence, can be a significant source of stress for students, particularly those transitioning from more structured educational systems. Student C, who advanced from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, reported experiencing imposter syndrome "all the time." She highlighted that the shift to Master's level education, which demands greater self-directed research and time management, intensified her feelings of inadequacy. Despite her previous successes, she constantly doubted her abilities and felt compelled to overcompensate by working excessively to prove herself.

This pattern of overcompensation is a common trait among individuals with imposter syndrome, who often feel the need to work harder than their peers to validate their worth (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). Student C also mentioned that, as a non-native English speaker, she frequently felt her language skills were insufficient, adding another layer of stress to her academic life.

- **Financial Disparities**

Student B pointed out the financial disparities among students at Durham, noting that social events and extracurricular activities often required significant financial investment. This economic divide can exacerbate feelings of imposter syndrome, as students from less affluent backgrounds may struggle to participate in activities that are perceived as integral to social integration and academic success. The financial barriers faced by these students contribute to feelings of exclusion and inadequacy, reinforcing their sense of being outsiders.

- **Visa Status and Future Prospects**

For many international students, concerns about visa status and future employment prospects add another layer of stress. Student A expressed anxiety about securing employment after graduation, particularly given the additional challenges of visa sponsorship. This uncertainty surrounding their prospects compounds their imposter syndrome, making the job search process more daunting and stressful.

- **Gender Disparities**

Student C highlighted the gendered nature of imposter syndrome, noting her exclusion from male-dominated spaces at Durham. She referred to "men's clubs" and networking events where women were underrepresented, which reinforced her feelings of inadequacy. Research indicates that women in male-dominated fields often experience heightened levels of imposter syndrome due to the lack of female role models and the pressure to prove themselves in competitive environments (Parkman, 2016).

## **Recognising Imposter Syndrome: Manifestations and Impact**

The experiences shared by the students highlight various manifestations of imposter syndrome and its significant impact on their emotional well-being and academic performance. It is important to note that imposter syndrome is not something to cure but something to recognise and manage (Reid, 2022). Understanding imposter syndrome is essential for addressing it effectively. Rather than viewing it as a problem to be eradicated, it is more beneficial to see it as an aspect of oneself that requires ongoing management. Recognising the signs of imposter syndrome and developing strategies to cope with its effects can lead to more effective support systems and personal resilience, ultimately enhancing both academic and personal success.

- **Emotional and Psychological Effects**

Student A reported feelings of dread and anxiety, especially when facing new challenges or opportunities. The pressure to perform exceptionally well often led to self-imposed stress, impacting their overall emotional states.

Student B described the emotional toll of imposter syndrome as "crushing." The persistent feeling of not belonging made them feel alienated and "worthless" at times, affecting their general sense of well-being and mental health.

Student C mentioned experiencing physical symptoms such as nervousness and stomach aches before significant academic events. She also noted relying on smoking to calm her nerves before presentations or exams, indicating the profound psychological impact of imposter syndrome.

- **Behavioural Changes and Coping Mechanisms**

Student B admitted to minimising their presence in academic settings to avoid drawing attention. This tendency to downplay one's presence is a common coping mechanism for individuals with imposter syndrome, who fear being exposed as frauds (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

Student C reported working excessively during her studies as a way to compensate for her perceived inadequacies. Overwork and perfectionism are common behaviours associated with imposter syndrome, as individuals believe they must continually prove their worth through hard work (Trotman et al., 2018).

Despite these challenges, the students found support through their peers and mentors. Student C emphasised the importance of having a supportive research group, which helped mitigate some of the negative effects of imposter syndrome.

### **Imposter Syndrome in the Classroom**

Imposter syndrome often manifests in academic settings, where students are expected to perform at high levels and contribute to discussions. The interviews revealed various ways this syndrome affects classroom experiences, particularly concerning participation, group work, and academic culture.

- **Class Participation and Engagement**

Student A experienced unique pressure to contribute in class, especially as the only black student present. They felt an obligation to represent their perspective while simultaneously worrying about appearing too eager or being judged. This tension between contributing and fearing judgment is common among students with imposter syndrome, who frequently second-guess their contributions (Parkman, 2016).

Student C often felt less confident during her studies, worrying excessively about her grades and fearing failure despite her consistent performance. This fear of failure is a central aspect of imposter syndrome, as individuals struggle to internalise their achievements and instead focus on potential shortcomings (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

- **Group Work and Collaboration**

Collaborative projects were identified as significant triggers for imposter syndrome by all three students. Student A felt inadequate when paired with well-prepared peers, while Student C found that group work exacerbated her self-doubt, as she worried that her contributions would not be valued. Research shows that group work can amplify feelings of imposter syndrome, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds, who may feel they do not measure up to their peers.

## **Recommendations for Durham University**

- **Enhance Representation and Visibility**

Increasing the representation of women and minority groups in leadership positions and visible roles can help mitigate feelings of inadequacy. Having role models with diverse backgrounds can provide students with tangible examples of success and alleviate feelings of being an outsider.

- **Create Inclusive Activities and Support Systems**

Develop and promote inclusive activities that do not rely heavily on financial investment. For example, organising free or low-cost social events, peer support groups, and workshops can ensure all students have equal opportunities to engage and feel a sense of belonging.

- **Implement Targeted Workshops and Counselling Services**

Offer workshops and counselling services specifically designed to address imposter syndrome. These sessions could include strategies for building self-confidence, managing stress, and navigating cultural differences. Providing resources and tools for overcoming imposter syndrome can help students better cope with their challenges.

- **Foster Peer Networks and Mentorship Programmes**

Establish peer networks and mentorship programmes that connect students with mentors who share similar backgrounds or experiences. These programmes can

offer guidance, support, and encouragement, helping students to feel more integrated and valued within the academic community.

- **Promote Inclusive Academic Practices**

Review and adapt academic practices to be more inclusive. This includes recognising and valuing diverse contributions in group work, ensuring equitable participation in class discussions, and providing accommodations for non-native English speakers. By creating an environment where all students feel respected and heard, the university can help reduce the impact of imposter syndrome.

- **Address Financial Disparities**

Implement measures to address financial disparities among students. This could involve providing additional financial support or creating opportunities for students to engage in extracurricular activities without significant financial burdens. Ensuring that financial constraints do not hinder participation can help mitigate feelings of exclusion.

- **Raise Awareness and Reduce Stigma**

Increase awareness about imposter syndrome and its impact through campus-wide initiatives. Reducing the stigma associated with imposter syndrome can encourage students to seek help and support. This can be achieved through seminars, informational campaigns, and integrating discussions about imposter syndrome into the broader dialogue about mental health and well-being.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences shared by Student A, Student B, and Student C highlight the pervasive and multifaceted nature of imposter syndrome among international students at Durham University. Factors such as social and cultural differences, academic pressures, financial disparities, visa concerns, and gender disparities contribute to their feelings of inadequacy and lack of belonging. The competitive academic environment further exacerbates these insecurities, affecting students' emotional well-being, academic performance, and overall health.

To address these challenges, Durham University must take a proactive approach to create a more inclusive and supportive environment. By enhancing representation, offering inclusive activities, implementing targeted support services, fostering peer networks, addressing financial disparities, and raising awareness, the university can help alleviate the impact of imposter syndrome. These measures will not only benefit the students themselves but also contribute to a more equitable and supportive academic institution.

Establishing practical solutions and systemic changes will empower students to overcome imposter syndrome and thrive academically. By creating spaces where all students feel valued and supported, Durham University can enhance the overall academic experience and promote a more inclusive and successful educational environment.

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