



**Elitism and Isolation: The Influence of Class on Experiences of Imposter Syndrome at
Durham University**

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Abstract

Contemporary research conceives imposter syndrome partially as a symptom of structural inequalities in race, gender and class, not just as an individual phenomenon. However, more research is needed to provide evidence of this, especially concerning experiences of imposter syndrome in the British Higher Education (HE) system. This project utilises Durham University's unique position as the worst-rated university for social inclusion in England and Wales by recognising its potential as a case study for understanding class inequality in HE and its relation to imposter syndrome. In this context, we pose the primary research question of this study: what impact does class have on experiences of imposter syndrome at Durham University? There has been little to no previous research on the current state of class inequality at Durham University, nor a thorough investigation on the relationship between class and imposter syndrome, so this study is arguably well needed. Four research questions drove the analysis of the data: 1) how do students define and perceive imposter syndrome? 2) how do the symptoms of imposter syndrome impact students and how frequently? 3) do issues relating to class trigger imposter syndrome at Durham University? 4) how can the findings in this report inform the development of future policies that aim to mitigate the impact of imposter syndrome at Durham University? This study utilises survey data collected in 2023 at Durham University with 704 student respondents. Responses to 15 questions were analysed, 11 of which were analysed using basic frequency counts and cross-tabs via SPSS. The remaining 4 questions were open-text and so were thematically analysed using NVivo. Whether or not the respondent was a first-generation student and/or received a contextual offer from Durham University was used as a rough measure of class. The findings provide evidence that there is a strong relationship between class and imposter syndrome, with first-generation students and those who received contextual offers more

likely to be impacted by imposter syndrome to a greater extent and more frequently, and that one of the greatest factors in the development of imposter syndrome amongst students at Durham University is the disproportionate prevalence of academic privilege. As such, these findings provide depth to controversies surrounding Durham University, with students reporting a culture of elitism. Going forth, not only can this study inform theoretical understandings of the relationship between class and imposter syndrome, but it can and should be utilised by Durham University to inform future policies that the effects of mitigate imposter syndrome and address the issues of diversity, inequality, and elitism commonly reported by its students.

Introduction

Overview of Durham University

Durham University was officially founded in 1832 by the Bishop of Durham, William Van Mildert, following hundreds of years of religious scholarship in the city and multiple attempts to establish a higher education institution in the north of England to compete against the dominance of Oxbridge (Durham World Heritage Site, 2017a). The university's founding came after a renewed interest in social reform leading up to the 1832 Reform Bill, with the Dean of Durham, John Jenkinson, proposing that the expansion of the education system should be heavily connected to the Cathedral's mission as an educational institution (Durham World Heritage Site, 2017b). As such, Durham Cathedral, with its historical reputation as one of the wealthiest cathedrals in the country, provided much of the initial financial support for the establishment of Durham University. The influence of the Cathedral on the university remains evident to this day.

Durham University is often recognised as the third-oldest university in England behind Oxford and Cambridge and is seen as one of the country's most prestigious. Although the portmanteau 'Doxbridge' has failed to gain widespread use, Durham University's comparisons to

Oxford and Cambridge reflect important characteristics that influence student and academic life and stem from the university's early history of being modelled after the Oxbridge system. Such similarities include their collegiate-based system (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010, p.73), close ties to the Anglican church, large privately educated student populace (HESA, 2023), and their academic excellence. The university is currently ranked 78th globally (QS World University Rankings, 2024) and 7th out of 130 universities nationally (Complete University Guide, 2024).

There is little to no research on the influence of class on the student population at Durham University, let alone in particular reference to impostor syndrome. However, publicly available data reveals Durham University to be the worst for social inclusion in England and Wales out of 115 institutions, with only 48.4% of Durham students coming from non-selective state schools and 23% being first-generation students (Patel, 2023). This is compared to the national averages of 91% and 43% respectively (HESA, 2024). It is therefore not surprising that Durham University has been frequently reported as having the lowest state-school intake out of any other UK university (Mohamed and Hodgson, 2022) and garnering a controversial reputation due to classist discrimination (Askham, 2021).

Previous Research on Imposter Syndrome in Higher Education

Imposter syndrome can be roughly defined as a 'perceived fraudulence' (Kolligian Jr. and Sternberg, 1991) in which an individual doubts their abilities and achievements compared to others in a given setting, such as a workplace or a place of education, leading them to believe that they are an 'imposter'. The term has seen a surge in popularity in academia, with over 1,200 publications released on the imposter phenomena since 1978, 80% of which have been published in the last two decades (Mak, Kleitman and Abbott, 2019).

Early research conceptualised feelings of impostorism as a predisposition in particular individuals or as a personality disorder (Mak, Kleitman and Abbott, 2019). However, contemporary research challenges this position and argues that the phenomenon should be seen more as a social, public and political issue, particularly concerning experiences of impostorism in the British Higher Education (HE) system (Breeze, Addison and Taylor, 2022). There has been recent discussion on the systemic dimension of imposter syndrome and calls to develop a deeper understanding of the effects of inequality across gender (Grove, 2019), race (Mirza, 2018), and class (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; see also Olah, 2019; Loveday, 2016). Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013), in particular, established that, despite the widening access to university since the start of the 21st century in Britain, more economically privileged students display a better propensity at ‘playing the game’ of academia (a game which is pre-established to the middle-class advantage) by mobilising and utilising their privileged ‘social and economic capital’, such as by knowing the ‘rules of the game’ and how to achieve success in university by drawing upon knowledge exclusive to the middle-class from their pre-university experiences and social milieu, the conscious and internalised strategic advantage of the middle-class in gaining additional academic capital such as internships, and the ability of middle-class students to further increase their ‘personal capital’ for graduate employability from the economic support from their parents, their privileged social networks, and long-term investment in leisure and extra-curricular activities which are not as easily accessible to working class students (pp.740-741).

The work of Addison and Stephens Griffin (2022) provided a glimpse into the personal impacts of imposter syndrome in the British HE system, highlighting how structural inequalities of race, gender, and class are large factors in the everyday experiences of imposter syndrome and

create an impact on students' academic engagement, mental health and sense of belonging.

Concluding that imposter syndrome is commonly experienced in UK universities, Addison and Stephens Griffin reiterate that more evidence is needed to create a thorough account of how imposter syndrome is shaped and experienced amongst HE students.

Research Aims

This project intends to continue the work of previous researchers in demonstrating how imposter syndrome is a systemic issue and not solely an individual phenomenon. This project recognises that more evidence is needed to understand the role structural inequality plays in personal experiences in the British Higher Education system, how these structural factors trigger imposter syndrome, and what particular impacts they have on students. As Durham University has been rated as the worst for social inclusion in England and Wales and has had little to no official research conducted to investigate accusations of classism, this project recognises the unique opportunity that Durham University provides to be a case study investigating systemic class issues in HE and to what extent such inequalities manifest imposter syndrome. The primary research question of this case study is therefore as follows: what impact does class have on experiences of imposter syndrome at Durham University? This study hypothesises that there is a strong relationship between imposter syndrome and class, and that class has a significant impact on Durham University students.

To answer the primary RQ, four additional research questions were designed:

1. How do students define and perceive imposter syndrome?
2. How do the symptoms of imposter syndrome impact students and how frequently?

3. Do issues relating to class trigger imposter syndrome in students at Durham University?
4. How can the findings in this report inform the development of future policies that aim to mitigate the impact of imposter syndrome at Durham University?

Method

Sample

From the survey sample, there are 704 valid cases. The majority of participants reported themselves as female, with a 30:65% male and female split, and 3.3% non-binary. The prevalence of first-generation students in the sample was low but not insignificant (28.6%). Less than a majority of students received a contextual (decreased) UCAS offer, with 51.9% reporting that they did not receive one and 34.4% reporting that they did. A significant number of students did not know if they had received a contextual offer or not. Nearly half of the first-generation students (49.8%) in the sample received a contextual offer from the university, compared to 27.9% of non-first-generation students.

Instrument

This case study utilises data from a questionnaire survey conducted in 2023. Using a non-probability, volunteer sampling framework, researchers administered a survey using Qualtrics, with participants being recruited from the Durham University student population via links circulated through internal university networks. All participants were over the age of 18 and, at the time of the survey, were current students of Durham University. Responses to 15 questions from the survey were used in this project, 4 of which were answered using open-text boxes. Data collected from the closed-text responses included demographic information, such as level of study, age, gender, contextual offer status, and information on the frequency of

symptoms of imposter syndrome experienced by the student and its impact on them. A full list of the questions can be found in the Appendix.

Design

A Case Study

To uncover personal experiences, a case study is appropriate as it allows for “in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues” (Crowe et al., 2019). Here, a case study is understood to be a naturalistic investigation of phenomena without manipulating any variables. The findings of this project do not intend to be generalisable across other HE institutions but do intend to inform future theoretical understandings.

Class

Due to the difficulty of defining class, no exact definition will be followed. Instead, student demographic information commonly found throughout academia and the university application process will be used as a rough but imperfect guide in the study of class inequality. Such demographic information includes whether the respondent is a first-generation student and/or was given a contextual offer to Durham University in the application process. FirstGens defines an individual as a ‘first-generation student’ if neither of the student’s parents or carers attended university or completed a degree (FirstGens, 2024). In an attempt to offset the influence of privilege in accessing higher education, Durham University issues ‘contextual offers’ which lower the grade requirements to be accepted into the university. The university takes several criteria into account when issuing contextual offers, including whether the student received free school meals, is estranged or a carer, attended a state school, and lives in an area low in socioeconomic measures and educational attainment. The project will also take into account if students define themselves as state-educated or as working-class.

RQ1

To answer the first research question, answers to Q12 (“How would you define imposter syndrome? Please feel free to list words or phrases that come to mind when you hear the term ‘imposter syndrome’”) were analysed using NVivo’s autocoded thematic analysis to provide an initial understanding of the concepts employed by participants. This was paralleled with a manual thematic analysis that uncovered patterns across the data not previously found by the automatic analysis. The manual thematic analysis conducted in this study follows the method laid out by Matthews and Ross (2010, pp.374-377), and is as follows:

1. Reading the raw data and noting down your interpretation
2. Looking at your interpretations across the cases
3. Identify categories that are at the next level of conceptualisation and are inclusive of your interpretations

Some themes uncovered included negative feelings of the self, such as ‘self-doubt’ and ‘inferiority’, and a belief that the individual is ‘out of place’ and did not earn or ‘deserve’ their position. The themes uncovered were used to inform a second stage of analysis, a keyword search using NVivo which tallied all exact references to a particular word, such as ‘inadequate’, across all responses to the question. The goal of this was to gauge which particular words were most commonly used by students to define imposter syndrome to uncover a consensus understanding of the phenomena. The particular words of focus in the keyword search were words that had been previously found to be commonly used across responses during the manual thematic analysis stage.

RQ2

To answer the second research question, data collected from Q13, Q14, Q18 and Q19 (see Appendix) was analysed. Basic frequency counts of the four variables (*LastExperience*, *Frequency*, *ImpactOnEngagement*, *ImpactOnAttendance*) were conducted using SPSS to understand how commonly imposter syndrome is experienced at the university and the extent of its impact. Six cross-tabs were then generated to ascertain the relationship between the frequency and the extent of the impact of imposter syndrome with first-generation student status and whether or not the student received a contextual offer. The end goal was to understand whether or not first-generation students and those who received contextual offers were more likely to experience imposter syndrome more frequently and experience a greater impact from it.

RQs 3 & 4

To answer the third research question, 363 responses to Q15 (“Are there any specific times, places or people which activate imposter syndrome?”) were manually coded out of a total of 461. An initial thematic analysis of Q15 was conducted in the same manner as the analysis of Q12, with the raw data being read and organised using Excel, notes taken in Word, and later interpolated for overarching themes. Based on this, a more thorough thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo. All responses were read, analysed and organised into codes reflective of the themes previously found. The number of coded items acted as a rough count of the number of times particular themes and issues were raised by students in their responses. The same method of analysis was followed for the fourth research question. 276 responses were manually coded out of a total of 364 responses to Q22 (“What would you like to see change at the university to help with the impacts of imposter syndrome?”).

It is worth noting that manual coding of the open-text responses should be taken as a rough approximation of the number of references to particular codes. Furthermore, the number of references between each code should not be taken as a 100% reliable and representative reflection of the distribution of beliefs and perspectives across the sample, especially as a high number of responses are assigned to multiple, often thematically overlapping codes.

Findings

How Do Students Define and Perceive Imposter Syndrome?

Overall, students displayed conceptual familiarity with imposter syndrome. The vast majority of the sample were able to provide keywords and ideas which reflect contemporary understandings of the phenomena and align with the responses of other participants.

Table 1

Keyword Search of Symptoms of Imposter Syndrome

Word (what imposter syndrome makes you feel like...)	Number of Exact References
Incompetent	4
Insecure	5
Unworthy	5
Undeserving	19
Inadequate	23
Fraud(ulent)	25
(Not) Deserving	28
(Not) Enough	144

Students defined imposter syndrome using negative language surrounding self-worth, such as through synonyms like ‘incompetent’, ‘inadequate’, and so on. This sense of inferiority

and perceived lack was most commonly referred to as not feeling like you are ‘deserving’, which was referenced 28 times, or ‘enough’, which was referenced 144 times. In particular, students highlighted that an individual with imposter syndrome is likely to think that they are not smart, talented, hard-working, or qualified enough compared to what they feel they need to be.

Table 2

Keyword Search of the Context of Imposter Syndrome

Word	Number of References (including stemmed words)
Self	19
Skills	25
Position	53
Achievement	58
Place	88

As seen in Figure 1 (see *Findings* section), students contextualised these feelings of inferiority and lack in relation to personal characteristics and their position within a particular environment. Students most commonly perceive imposter syndrome as not feeling that their achievements are enough for their given place or position, that their achievements were a product of luck or chance, or that even despite their achievements they still do not truly belong. In total, there were 58 references to achievement. A keyword search of ‘place’ also revealed similar sentiments throughout the responses, with a degree of ‘otherness’ being expressed by a significant number of students, as see in Figure 2. In this case, imposter syndrome was described as being akin to feeling ‘out of place’. Such feelings were self-justified through the belief that they do not possess the skills or knowledge necessary to truly belong in that environment.

How Do The Symptoms of Impostor Syndrome Impact Students and How Frequently?

Impact

While a large majority of participants reported that impostor syndrome has little to no impact on their university attendance, 56.2% of students reported that impostor syndrome has a moderate to great effect on their engagement with academic staff (see Figures 3 & 4). Students who received a contextual offer were only slightly more likely to report a moderate to great effect of impostor syndrome on engagement levels (57.8%) than students who did not receive a contextual offer (51%; see Tables 5 to 8 in the *Tables* section). Similarly, first-generation students are slightly more likely to report a moderate to great effect of impostor syndrome on engagement levels (61.1%), with a difference of around 10% compared to non-first-generation students (52.3%).

The greatest difference observed was in terms of the impact of impostor syndrome on attendance, with students who received a contextual offer roughly twice as likely to report impostor syndrome having ‘A great deal’ of impact on their attendance (12.4%) compared to students who did not receive a contextual offer (6%). Similarly, first-generation students were nearly twice as likely to report impostor syndrome having ‘A great deal’ of impact on their attendance (12.6%) compared to non-first-generation students (7%).

Frequency

Impostor syndrome is frequently experienced by most students, with 46.7% of participants reporting experiencing impostor syndrome within the week before filling out the survey (see Figure 5), while only around 1 in 10 reported having last experienced impostor syndrome more than 6 months before. Further to this point, most participants (59.2%) report experiencing impostor syndrome at least once a month or more (see Figure 6). While more

students experience imposter syndrome once a month (16.6%) or once a week (19%), there is a significant proportion of students who report regular occurrences of imposter syndrome, with 12.5% experiencing it every other day and 11.1% experiencing it every day.

While the extent to which those who received a contextual offer from Durham University reported experiencing imposter syndrome more often than those who did not receive one is not particularly large, it is not insignificant, with 48.5% of those who did not receive a contextual offer reporting experiencing imposter syndrome at least once a week, compared to 61.3% of those who did. Thus, those with a contextual offer are more likely to experience imposter syndrome more regularly (see Tables 9 & 10 in the *Tables* section). Similarly, first-generation students reported experiencing imposter syndrome more often than non-first-generation students, with 66.3% of first-generation students reporting experiencing imposter syndrome at least once a week compared to 48.2% of non-first-generation students.

How Do Issues Relating to Class Trigger Imposter Syndrome in Students at Durham University?

Analysis reveals that class is a large factor in triggering feelings of imposter syndrome amongst the Durham University student populace. Out of 363 coded responses, 45 directly referenced class as a triggering factor of imposter syndrome. This equates to roughly 10% of all responses to this question. Thematic analysis of the 45 responses revealed that students largely experience symptoms of imposter syndrome when confronting perceived and observed differences in economic affluence, educational background, accent and culture. A total of 162 students reported feeling the symptoms of imposter syndrome in seminars, while 37 experienced them in social settings. 87 students detailed how the effects of imposter syndrome worsened when working or preparing for assignments or exams and receiving marks.

Table 3*Coded Analysis of Q15*

Code (places, people, situations, etc.)	Number of References
Academic settings (tutorials, seminars, etc.)	162
Assignments & grades	87
Encountering class difference	45
Social settings (socials, formals, etc.)	37
Extra-curricular activities	21
General diversity	16

Economic Affluence

27 of the responses (5.9% of all responses) describe how being around “rich”, “privileged”, and “upper-class” students triggers feelings related to imposter syndrome. A primary reason for this commonly stated included a perception of being “disadvantaged” and in some sense behind more privileged students due to the advantages afforded to them. For example, one student commented that they experience imposter syndrome during extra-curricular activities such as certain sports as they had “never had the opportunity to play before but others will have because of their background”. Another student discussed feelings of impostorism due to being from a working-class background, describing it as a “continuous feeling” activated since other students haven’t experienced the things: “My grandad had to work down a pit for a living, and a lot of students at Durham don’t really get that”, they said.

Academic Background

The disparity between private and state education was frequently cited as a central issue of class in Durham. Respondents expressed feeling ‘disadvantaged’ due to being (or perceiving

to be) less well-educated than privately educated peers. One student expressed how middle-class and upper-class students appear “much more prepared for university”. This reflects the findings of Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2013) as previously discussed. Another student detailed how being in discussion groups with privately educated students activates imposter syndrome since many things discussed are things that they “never had the opportunity to learn or experience”, leading them to believe that “my background has made me much more likely to be disadvantaged and think I am not good enough”. A second highlighted the relationship between imposter syndrome and education, detailing how her imposter syndrome is worsened when other students “talk about their achievements”, such as being a prefect or a leader of a school sports team, as her “school had no opportunities like that”.

A repeatedly mentioned issue regarding educational background at Durham University is the over-representation of students from particular private schools, with many state-educated students coming to realise that many privately educated students “know of each other’s schools”. One student expressed experiencing imposter syndrome when, in first-year, they found it common “for students to ask what school I’d attended”. They report that it is a fairly common experience for them to be “the only state-educated student in a group of people”. Another student bluntly expressed that “there’s no way my crappy high school prepared me for this”.

Accent

Students commonly referenced accent as a factor in the perception of class differences and in triggering imposter syndrome. Self-defined ‘local’ and ‘northern’ students frequently referenced feeling like ‘the other’ by being “outnumbered” in a “majority southern student” university. Respondents often referred to this difference as not just of accent but of being less

“well-spoken”, insinuating a perceived power dynamic in which those with an RP accent are in some way thought of as superior and/or more well-educated.

The Durham University Culture

These findings demonstrate that the general culture of Durham University is a large factor in the triggering of imposter syndrome for a significant number of students. As many report that imposter syndrome is experienced “in class and around campus”, the issue appears widespread. Overall, respondents portrayed the culture of Durham University as one which perpetuates the norms and traditions of the upper-class and privately educated and as a result, induces feelings of being an imposter in less privileged students. Particular settings in which students report as favouring upper-class, privately educated students and causing feelings of being ‘out of place’ include the college-catered dining halls, the old and historic buildings of the university, matriculation, gowned formals, and white-tie balls. One student summarised the culture as “Posh students, balls, formals, wearing gowns”. Another student provided defining characteristics of “The Durham Stereotype”: privately educated, rich and well-spoken.

How Can the Findings in This Report Inform the Development of Future Policies That Aim to Mitigate the Impact of Imposter Syndrome at Durham University?

Diversity

Increasing the diversity of the student population was the most recommended action for the university to take to mitigate the impact of imposter syndrome at Durham University, equating to roughly 8% of all valid responses. 7 of the 30 diversity-related responses recommended an increase in state-educated students attending Durham University. Many of these respondents justified this by referring to the disproportionate number of privately educated students at the university (38% of the student population) even though 93% of the UK is

state-educated. One student commented, “I know Durham is an elite university but the private school culture feels overwhelming. I’d like to see more state school students / more focus on making a culture that is inclusive,”.

7 of the diversity-related responses recommended increasing the representation of working-class students. Other recommendations relevant to increasing diversity were either not specific to any demographic or were not exclusively applicable to class. 4 respondents recommended increasing the number of “local” students, i.e. those from the Durham surrounding area and more generally from the North East of England. A student expressed that it is “bizarrely isolating to be a local student at this university” due to the low number of Northern and local students, making them feel “out of place” even though they grew up in the area. Furthermore, 4 respondents expressed a sense of gender imbalance amongst particular departments, such as computer science, and 3 respondents suggested an increase in POC and international students.

Table 4

Analysis of Q22

Code (changes to be made)	Number of References
Increase the diversity of the student population	30
Overcome academic privilege	30
More balanced and specific feedback on assignments	27
More talks and workshops	22
Tackle the elitist culture of the university	20
More support and awareness from staff	18
More support and awareness during first-year	17
More praise and reassurance	17

More general awareness and support	16
More welfare support	16
Changes to seminars, tutorials, etc.	15
Student/staff relationship	15
The university cannot do anything	12
Staff attitudes and behaviours	12
Awareness and support for first-gen scholars and those with contextual offers	9
Belief that it is a personal problem	6

Academic Privilege

24 respondents (6.6% of total responses) recommended that the university should directly tackle academic privilege by creating new policies aimed at lessening the effects of educational inequality, such as by providing extra support for students from a background not traditionally associated with university education, such as first-generation scholars, state-educated students, and those from working-class communities. Particular recommended forms of support included providing tailored feedback to those not familiar with university education, general inductions to academic culture and life, workshops that teach academic skills that some students might not have had the ability to have already gained, and, finally, increased awareness from staff and lecturers on the varied amounts of pre-attained knowledge amongst the cohort.

One student expressed that the main issue is “about life and education before university”, believing that the root of the problem is that some students need more support because they “never had the same opportunities and went to worse schools”. As such, the university needs to develop “less of an expectation that people will know things that only really get taught in private schools.” To overcome this knowledge gap, another student recommended seminars aimed at

first-gen/state-educated students and focused on skills like “how to read academic” or “how to cite”, as “these things are difficult if nobody around you has studied at uni before,”.

The gap in subject-specific knowledge was also an issue raised by students, with one student requesting that the university train course leaders to have less presumption of knowledge in the Classics and Ancient History department, a subject “where access to pre-university education is very limited if you aren’t privately educated, with the result that a lot of discussion can feel exclusive by nature,”. Another student recommends providing “baseline resources for students who may come from a less educated background” to overcome this subject-specific knowledge gap, such as a reading list containing more foundational subject knowledge to pre-empt discussions in seminars and lectures.

Lastly, to overcome academic privilege, many respondents recommended that the university should create more awareness for first-generation scholars and those with contextual offers. In particular, one student suggested that the university needs to consider the increased likelihood of these students being affected by imposter syndrome and how is best to support them. One student advised that there needs to be more explanation of contextual offers. “For a considerable length of time last year I believed the contextual offer I received was just so the university could tick a box to show they weren’t just enrolling Eton(like) students - I thought the university expected me to fail,”, they said.

Cultural Elitism

20 of the coded responses suggested that a large issue which needs to be tackled is the general elitist culture of Durham University. This includes the actions, attitudes, and cultural traditions held by the university as an institution, and from both the staff and student body. One student summarised the issue as the fact that “the set-up of the university sort of breeds private

school culture, and [that] individuals from private schools feel more ‘at-home’ than state-school kids”. Reasons for this provided include the similarity of traditions and culture between Durham University and private schools, such as the fact that “college is very similar to boarding houses, and formals and balls are more the kind of events you’d experience at a private school,”. Another student directly stated that the university needs to “be more accepting and include and not play into worshipping the private school educated people,”.

Other students expressed that the university cannot or should not directly change the traditions of the university by instead focusing only on addressing the stereotype of the typical Durham student and the attitudes held by some. One student expressed that the culture at Durham University is “intolerant” due to the prevalence of classist attitudes. Another student simply responded to the question by writing “They [the university] need to do something about the elitism here,”. A student recommended that the elitist attitudes of some students should be addressed by “educating students from more privileged backgrounds about their advantages,”.

Some students also emphasised that elitism is not exclusive to the student body, and that is it instead “an institutional problem that infects departments” since, in their perspective, financial and academic privilege helps to “gain a lot of status in departments” as staff “end up preferring and treating [these] people differently,”. This student in particular felt that they have to “constantly battle for extra help and support” which makes them feel “like you don’t belong in the rich, white, able-bodied mans club that is Durham University,”.

Other Recommended Changes

A significant number of the responses to Q22 also refer to recommended changes that are not exclusively related to class-relevant factors, or are class-related but less commonly suggested. Non-class relevant recommended changes include general academic and institutional

changes such as providing more balanced and specific feedback on assignments, providing more talks and workshops, creating a stronger support system in first-year, encouraging more support and awareness from staff, as well as changes to the dynamic of seminars, lectures, etc. and the staff-student relationship.

Feedback on Assignments. The most commonly suggested change was for the university to alter the marking system by encouraging markers and class tutors to provide more balanced, more specific and tailored feedback to allow students to understand their mistakes in-depth and with a structure and not unnecessarily trigger feelings of imposter syndrome. 27 respondents made suggestions along these lines, totalling 7.4% of all responses. In regards to improving the feedback system, particular recommendations included being more transparent about the mark scheme, providing greater detail on mistakes and detailed advice on how to improve, and, most commonly, ensuring to include positive feedback in addition to critiques. One student summarised the sentiment shared by the sample by expressing the the university needs to provide “greater detail on feedback on more specific things I can change next time to improve and aiming for at least one positive comment at least reflecting on the effort put in or offering to discuss if there is an underlying struggle/challenge.”

University Support Structure. Overall, a significant amount of the responses reflected a need for the university to create a thoroughly engaged, warm and open environment for students to mitigate the effects of imposter syndrome. The most commonly suggested method to create a sense of belonging and support, and to spread awareness of imposter syndrome, was through university-run talks and workshops on relevant issues.

Often, the most detailed recommendations on providing talks and workshops overlapped with an expressed need for greater support in first-year. This remains relevant for first-year

first-generation scholars and state-educated students, but also first-year students generally. 17 respondents recommended greater support in first-year, a significant number of which suggested that the university should run more inductions and introduce greater guided support to help students navigate the university and settle into academic life. A student suggested that a talk or workshop at the start of first-year should “discuss imposter syndrome directly”. “Implementing a support system from admission could ease the transition into university life, and hopefully provide students with the information and tools to manage their imposter syndrome from the beginning,”, said another student.

Further to the point of creating a warmer environment, 17 respondents expressed that the university needs to encourage tutors and staff to be more reassuring and encouraging as there is repeatedly a lack of praise in the university culture. One student expressed that the most significant change to mitigate the effects of imposter syndrome would be more often “congratulating students throughout their study for getting into Durham” as “amongst the stresses of assignments, sometimes this achievement is forgotten,”. Another student expressed the university as a “cold place”, suggesting that more “warmth, empathy, understanding, and reassurance from staff/lecturers” is needed. 16 respondents also recommended greater access and signposting to university welfare services to make students feel supported through their difficulties.

Student-Staff Relationship & Staff Attitudes and Behaviours. 15 respondents mentioned that the university needs to improve the dynamic of the student-staff relationship, such as by increasing the amount of 1:1 interaction, increasing the ease of accessing office hours, and generally better integrating the staff/lecturer and student bodies. One student expressed that the environment makes you “feel like a small fish in a big pond, you feel completely unnoticed

by a department and as soon as work becomes important it all becomes too overwhelming,”. Another student describes the relationship between staff, lecturers and seminar leaders with students as “distant”, while another expresses that they would like the opportunity to interact “with staff as people rather than authorities,”.

On top of the previously mentioned actions of staff assuming knowledge from students, many respondents also expressed an air of “academic superiority” from some staff and lecturers, indicating that particular staff training may be needed to mitigate the effects of imposter syndrome. Descriptions of these staff attitudes include being “toxic”, “dismissive”, “judgemental”, and “harsh”. One student suggested that the effects of imposter syndrome would be reduced if “professors didn’t belittle unintelligent questions,”. Another student said that the university needs to realise that often “it is the actions and attitudes of staff that create the issue,”. Although this is not as commonly recommended as other suggested changes, it is still an issue that needs to be investigated and addressed.

Impossibility of University-led Change. Although a minority, some students expressed a sense that any change that the university makes would be ineffective in mitigating imposter syndrome. While one student believed a sense of being an imposter is “a natural part of career progression”, many students justified the effectivity of policy as imposter syndrome is a personal problem of anxiety and insecurity, or the students themselves and not any structural influences. “It stems from fellow students, often just their own insecurities, so I’m not sure the university can do much about it,”, said one student. Many students expressed a sentiment that all the university can do is provide welfare support and various distractions to alleviate symptoms. Another student commented “I’m not sure the university can do much - this is too individual an issue,”. However, while holding this view, they also believe that the university “still needs to

work to overcome snobbery” amongst the student population “which can only reinforce the sense of being an imposter.”.

Conclusion

Understanding how structural factors such as class inequality influence experiences of imposter syndrome is integral to creating policies that mitigate the impact of such experiences and to address the root systemic issues at play. This case study has investigated the frequency and impact of imposter syndrome at Durham University on its students and its relation to class-based factors. It has also provided depth to the fact that Durham is the worst-rated university for social inclusion in England and Wales by creating a thorough account of student experiences concerning controversies frequently surrounding the university, such as systemic academic privilege and cultural elitism. In particular, this case study has found that students overall have good conceptual familiarity with imposter syndrome, the majority of students experience imposter syndrome frequently, and first-generation students and those with contextual offers are more likely to be academically impacted by imposter syndrome in terms of their engagement and attendance. Furthermore, it has demonstrated how the disproportionate economic affluence and academic privilege in the student population has caused a significant number of students to view Durham University as an institution that favours privately educated, rich, and ‘well-spoken’ individuals, and, as such, manifests resentment and triggers the effects of imposter syndrome, particularly in first-generation, non-RP speaking, working-class and state-educated students. It is evident from these findings that the effects of imposter syndrome are experienced throughout the university, in seminars, lectures, college balls and formals, and any other academic or social situation, especially during periods of assignments or when confronting those from more privileged backgrounds. Sadly, it is also evident that a small but not

insignificant number of students believe that the effects of imposter syndrome are worsened by the dismissive attitudes of some academic staff and by the reportedly cold and elitist atmosphere of the university. To overcome such issues, this report suggests that the University takes into account the recommendations of the students in this study going forward in policy-making, particularly by increasing the diversity of the student population, actively cultivating a less elitist, more inclusive culture, constructing a greater support network better attuned to issues of class and imposter syndrome via more 1:1 student-staff contact, welfare support, and inductions, talks, and workshops on university life, and, finally, most importantly, for the University to be institutionally aware at every level of the role class plays in experiences of imposter syndrome at Durham University.

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Tables

Table 5

Crosstab of Impact on Attendance x Contextual Offer Status

	Contextual Offer					Total
		Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say	
Impact	A great deal	24	17	6	3	50
	A lot	17	24	6	0	47
	Moderately	21	22	9	0	52
	A little	46	49	14	0	109
	Not at all	86	166	33	1	286
	Prefer not to say	0	1	0	0	1
Total		194	279	68	4	545

Table 6

Crosstab of Impact on Engagement x Contextual Offer Status

	Contextual Offer					Total
		Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say	
Impact	A great deal	30	28	7	2	67
	A lot	37	50	13	0	100
	Moderately	49	65	18	2	134
	A little	49	90	90	0	155
	Not at all	28	46	14	1	88
	Prefer not to say	1	1	0	0	2
Total		194	280	68	4	546

Table 7

Crosstab of Impact on Attendance x First-Generation Student Status

	First-Gen Status					Total
		Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say	
Impact	A great deal	22	25	3	0	67
	A lot	16	31	0	0	100
	Moderately	22	27	2	1	134
	A little	41	64	4	0	155
	Not at all	73	206	7	0	88
	Prefer not to say	0	1	0	0	2
Total		174	354	16	1	546

Table 8

Crosstab of Impact on Engagement x First-Generation Student Status

	First-Gen Status					Total
		Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say	
Impact	A great deal	25	39	3	0	67
	A lot	34	64	2	0	100
	Moderately	48	82	4	0	134
	A little	40	111	3	1	155
	Not at all	28	56	4	0	88
	Prefer not to say	0	0	0	0	2
Total		175	354	16	1	546

Table 9

Crosstab of Imposter Syndrome Frequency x Contextual Offer Status

	Contextual Offer					Total
		Yes	No	Don't know	Prefer not to say	
Frequency	Everyday	32	35	10	1	46
	Every other day	38	36	14	0	88
	Once a week	52	70	11	1	134
	Once a month	41	60	16	0	117
	Every other month	12	32	6	0	50
	Once or twice a year	16	39	5	0	60
	Other	6	15	5	1	27
	Prefer not to say	2	4	2	1	9
Total		199	291	69	4	563

Table 10

Crosstab of Imposter Syndrome Frequency x First Generation Student Status

	First-Gen Status					Total
		Yes First-Gen	Not First-Gen	Don't know	Prefer not to say	
Frequency	Everyday	33	42	3	0	78
	Every other day	39	46	3	0	88
	Once a week	40	89	4	1	134
	Once a month	33	83	1	0	117
	Every other month	9	40	1	0	50
	Once or twice a year	11	48	1	0	60
	Other	11	16	0	0	27
	Prefer not to say	1	5	3	0	9

Total		177	369	16	1	563
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Figures

Figure 1

Word-Tree of References to 'Achievements'

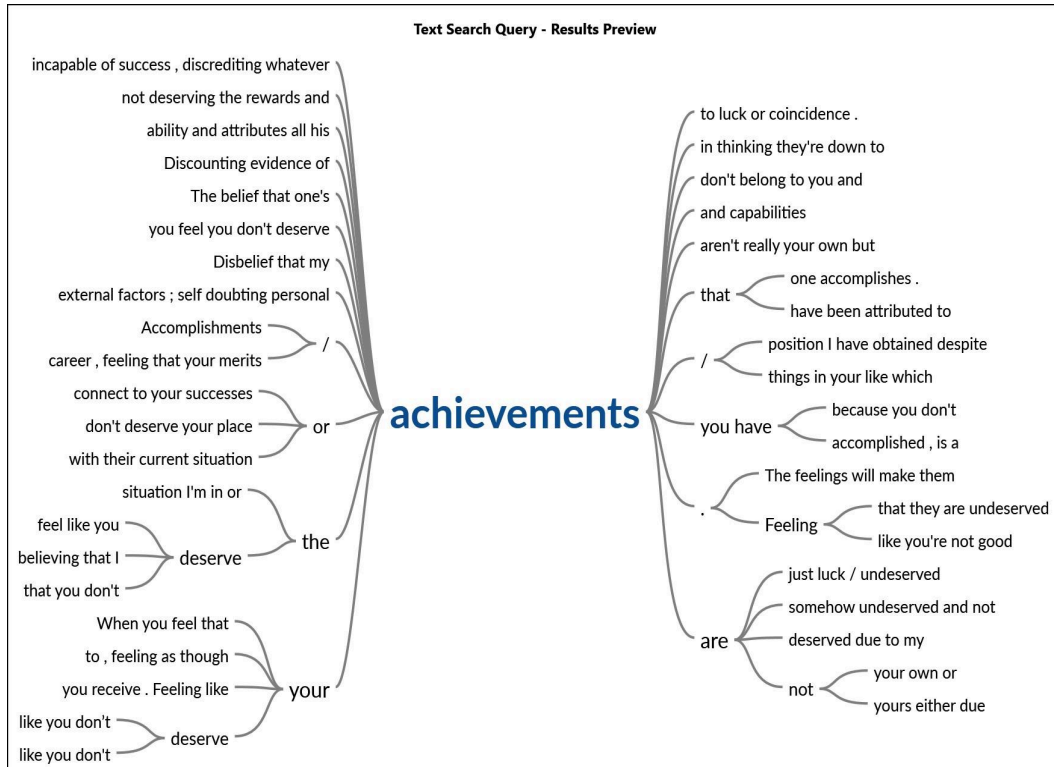


Figure 2

Word-Tree of References to 'Place'

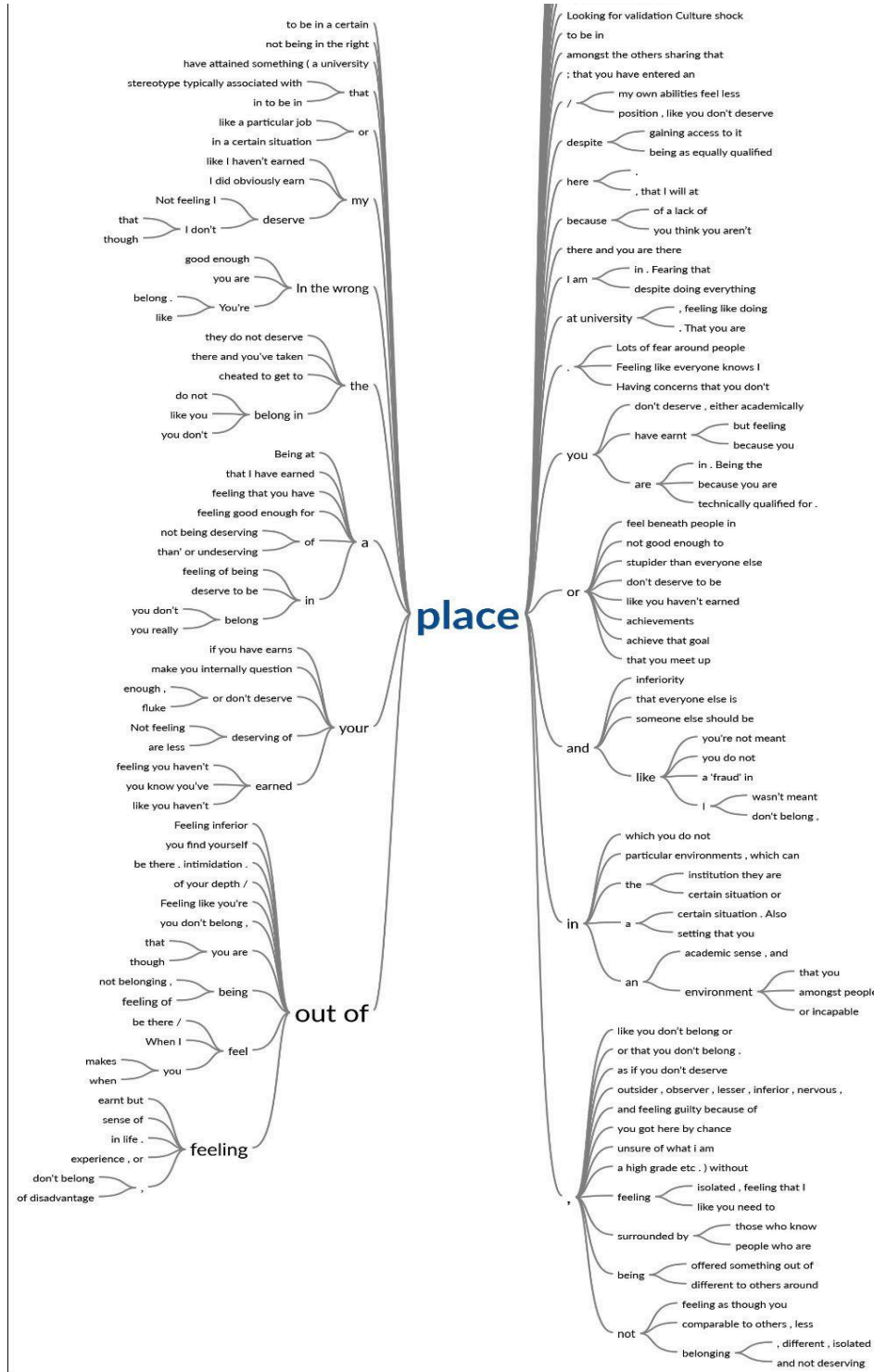


Figure 3

Impact of Imposter Syndrome on Attendance

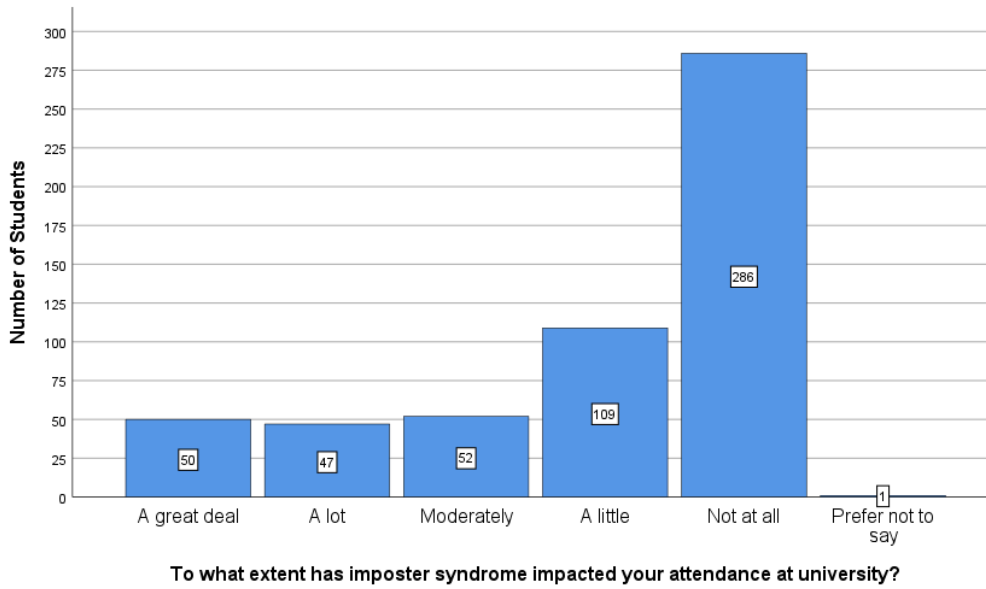


Figure 4

Impact of Imposter Syndrome on Engagement

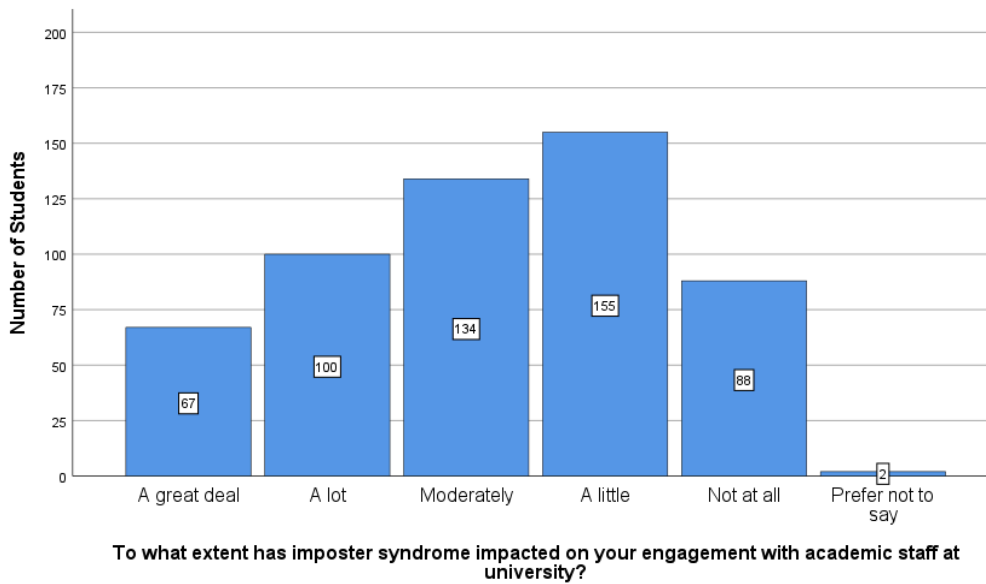


Figure 5

Last Experience of Imposter Syndrome

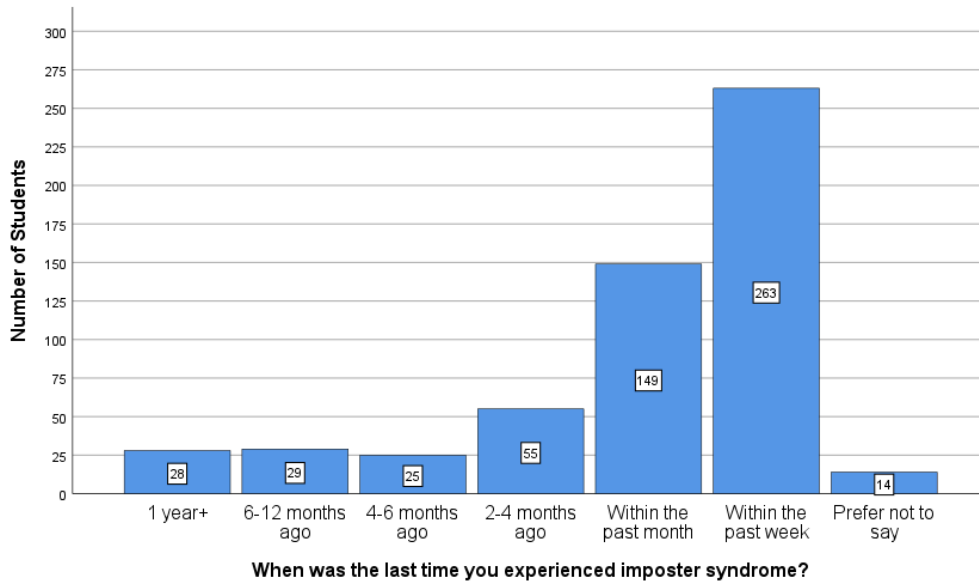
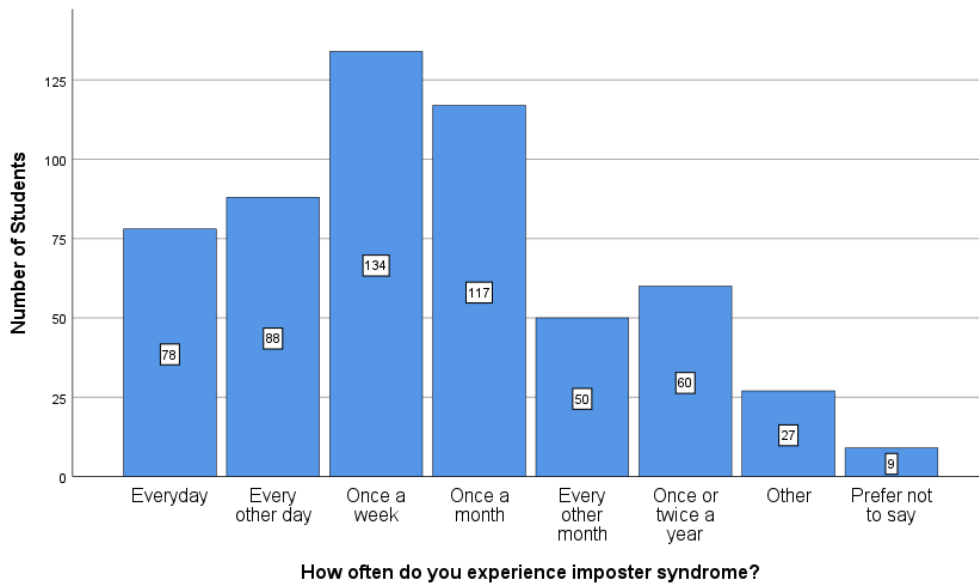


Figure 6

Frequency of Imposter Syndrome



Appendix

Multiple-Choice Answers

Question 1) What is your current level of study?

Question 3) Please specify your gender.

Question 6) What is your age group?

Question 10) Did you receive a contextual offer for Durham University?

Question 21) Has imposter syndrome ever made you feel like leaving university?

Likert-scales

Question 13) When was the last time you experienced imposter syndrome?

Question 14) How often do you experience imposter syndrome?

Question 18) To what extent has imposter syndrome impacted on your engagement with academic staff at university?

Question 19) To what extent has imposter syndrome impacted on your engagement with academic staff at university?

Open-text Responses

Question 9) Do you identify as a First-Generation Scholar? Definition: People who are among the first generation of family members to go to university or who are from families, schools or communities where going to university is not the norm. (multiple choice)

Question 12) How would you define imposter syndrome? Please feel free to list words or phrases that come to mind when you hear the term 'imposter syndrome'.

Question 15) Are there any specific times, places or people which activate imposter syndrome?

Question 22) What would you like to see change at the university to help with the impacts of imposter syndrome?