

# Feeling like a fraud - engaging students with imposter syndrome

## Introduction

Young (2018) used several questions to recognise those experiencing Imposter Syndrome.

Do you tend to feel crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your “ineptness?”

Do you believe that other people are smarter and more capable than you?

Do you sometimes shy away from challenges because of self-doubt?

Do you live in fear of being discovered or unmasked?’ (Young, 2018: 1)

In answering yes to one or more of these questions above, it represented the possibility that someone may be experiencing ‘Imposter Syndrome’. Originally defined by clinical psychologists Clance and Imes as:

“internal experience of intellectual phoniness in people who believe that they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite evidence of high achievement.” (Clance and Imes, 1978: 241)

IS is essentially the fear of being exposed as a fraud (Russell, 2017). Research shows that sufferers of IS have a ‘secret fear’ inside them (Qureshi et al, 2017: 107; Giles, 2010), the fear that they are not adequately able to perform a delegated role or that they lack the skills and knowledge; as a result, IS is strongly associated with burnout phenomenon, anxiety, depression, and thus has serious implications and impact on individuals’ lives as they battle with this identity crisis.

In the 1970s, impostor syndrome was first considered a trend among women who were advancing professionally, according to the American Psychological Association (Bauer-Wolf, 2017). Interestingly, research shows that IS is still at its highest amongst academics, at a rate of 70% (Young, 2018), but this is not a syndrome confined to working professionals. This article will focus on literature regarding students transitioning in Higher Education (HE) who have felt Imposter Syndrome and will explore associated relevant literature around engaging students in HE. The aim is therefore to provide the reader with in-depth background in this area whilst also suggesting practical strategies for use at HE level to engage undergraduate and postgraduate students with their programmes, despite the fact they may feel ‘like a fraud’ (Ramsey and Brown, 2018).

## Why is understanding of IS important?

A sense of belonging is an integral aspect of success in a long-term, group-oriented endeavour such as the pursuit of a university education. When students feel their presence at university is fraudulent, their achievements unfounded, or that they will be further disenfranchised if their true self is discovered, it is less likely that they will connect to the people around them and services that can help them achieve their educational goals. As Trowler (2010) highlights, a sound body of literature has established robust correlations between student involvement in a subset of ‘educationally purposive activities’, and positive outcomes of student success and development, including satisfaction, persistence, academic achievement and social engagement (Astin, 1984, 1993; Berger and Milem, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Goodsell, Maher and Tinto, 1992; Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh and Vesper, 1997; Pace, 1995; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

# Methodology

The authors gathered and analysed twenty-five research studies conducted with students in HE. The search involved the identification and exploration of empirical studies in a systematic manner. Empirical research is essentially 'data from the real world' (Flynn et al, 1990: 250), and in order to understand such a private phenomenon as IS, real world lived-experiences must be drawn upon. The literature review was conducted in a systematic way via online academic databases. The search terms involved primarily the term 'Imposter Syndrome', but also 'Impostor Phenomenon', 'impostorism' and 'fraud syndrome', as these are other terms notably used to refer to the experience where some individuals feel like an 'imposter'. Within the findings, the authors looked for titles set in HE institutions or working with HE students. In order to keep the findings as recent and relevant as possible, particularly due to the influx and integration of technology and digital literacy into HE in recent decades, studies were mostly drawn from the past 3 years, 2016 to present. However, with the appreciation that IS was first defined in 1978, some older studies are included to set a historical context for this phenomenon.

Having gathered relevant articles, the authors explored superordinate and subordinate themes across the literature, using Thematic Analysis, to recognise emerging themes across the broad data set. The authors then linked to recent literature on student engagement as well as their practical lived experiences of teaching in HE in order to propose practical strategies for supporting students who may be suffering from IS, in order to hopefully lessen effects on their physical and mental health, and to support their academic study through the affirmation of their academic identity.

So, what are the factors that may contribute to IS, and how can predictors be recognised in order for HE institutions to raise awareness of IS amongst students? It is important to acknowledge that often it is first generation students that may suffer from IS; being the first in a family to attend an HE institution can lead to added pressure, and result in low psychological well-being (Peteet, 2015: 175). Additionally, low ethnic identity has shown to be a predictor of IS (Peteet, 2015: 175). Ultimately, however, IS has no specific criteria, and these are only possible predictors to consider for the likelihood of IS.

## First generation students

Soria and Stebleton (2013) explore the obstacles of first generation students in university. Those students who have not had relatives go before them and so the experience has no close connection to their families. In contrast with students who were not first-generation students at university, Soria and Stebleton (2013) found core skills in Maths and English were weaker alongside general study skills. More interestingly relating to imposter syndrome and the feelings of belonging, first generation students were found statistically to feel more stressed, upset and depressed. Their need for assistance is greater and they face additional barriers to achieving academic success in comparison to students who are not first generation (Soria and Stebleton 2013).

Imposter Syndrome is discussed as a key point to consider with first generation students (p,15). There is a suggestion that previous first-generation students should act as mentors to support new students. Existing staff and students should help first generation students develop their academic skills, but importantly help build their confidence and levels of self-efficacy to study at this level of education. Developing better communication with these first-generation students will help them to overcome feelings of isolation and anxiousness. It is suggested in this research paper (Soria and Stebleton 2013) that celebrations are also helpful to recognise first generation students getting through their first year.

The broader mental health of first generation students is also discussed in the research of Soria and Stebleton (2013). This comes as an extension from their discussion on Imposter Syndrome. If young people feel they do not belong and are struggling in an unfamiliar environment this will increase levels of anxiety, depression and feelings of loneliness. It is therefore imperative that a support network is considered in Higher Education institutes to support first generation students. Those students who have no family experience or connection to Higher Education would benefit from individualised guidance, support (academic and pastoral) and continual (yearly) praise recognising their progression.

It is important to note that young undergraduate students (who we often associate with being first generation students) are not the only group at risk from IS. There is valid literature around the presence of Imposter Syndrome in mature students too (Chapman, 2017).

## Mature students

Chapman (2015) explores this sense of belonging in the university amongst mature students. Through exploring the different feelings of some of the mature students some reported that they questioned themselves on their own academic writing skills. “Am I doing this right” was the comment of one student who showed uncertainty in her own academic writing. Others in the study reported how they had to ‘translate’ the language of their lecturers into their language to comprehend what was being said. The unease of the mature students in Chapman’s (2015) study was overcome through peer relationships to help garner a feeling of togetherness and a range of opinions to decipher a collective understanding from what they had experienced in lectures. Chapman (2015) discussed the importance of feedback from lecturers to students to reduce their anxiety levels. Chapman concludes:

Feedback is vital for this too, together with a quick turnaround time as the anxiety is as much about being judged as it is about intellectual ability. The feeling that ‘I shouldn’t be here, they made a mistake on the admissions form’ is very common with Imposter Syndrome so allaying those fears through assessment and feedback is crucial for retention and progression. To this end feedback does not always have to be formal written, post-assessment feedback. A ‘You’re doing fine’ may go a long way to reassure a student who may be struggling and thinking about withdrawal. Feedback on assessments needs to be timely and concise. Too much can swamp a student and may compound their Imposter Syndrome. Short, clear feedback with explicit detail on how to improve for the next assessment is of far more use to the learner. A dialogue is crucial if the academic language is a barrier. Feedback needs to be understandable to the reader if they are expected to act upon it”  
(Chapman, 2015: 17)

## Ethnic identity and IS

Several studies raise the issue of IS as an underlying issue beneath anxiety and depression that may be felt by students at an HE institution. Having a low ethnic identity has been shown to be a predictor of IS amongst students (Solorzano and colleagues, 2000; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). In a study into correlation between IS and perceived racial discrimination in minority students (Cokley et al, 2013) at the University of Texas, Black, Asian and Latino students were involved in tests that explored experiences where the students had felt like ‘imposters’. The findings showed that black students who had experienced significant feelings of IS also felt higher levels of anxiety and depression that was linked to experiences of racism that the students perceived. Similarly, amongst the Asian students in the study, IS correlated to increased anxiety and depression- but associated with IS rather than racism. Interestingly, however, there was a different situation for the Latino students. Among Latino students who had felt IS, the levels of anxiety or depression were not especially high; the Latino students who reported feeling anxiety or depression did not show as suffering from IS, namely the students ‘did not have many impostor-related thoughts’ (Bauer-Wolf, 2017: 1). Cokley, one of the authors of the study, summarised:

“It is possible that among this sample of Latino/a American students, having low impostor feelings was associated in some way to fatalism (e.g., ‘People are going to think whatever they want to about me and there is nothing I can do about it’)”  
(Cokley et al, 2013: 95)

The main recommendation from this project suggests that when supporting students of colour, counsellors should aim to uncover if Imposter Syndrome is at the heart of anxiety, depression and poor mental health. If so, these fears

can begin to be addressed.

In Parkman's discussion on Imposter Syndrome (2016) she discusses the need for cultural changes to help those who feel they 'do not belong' in higher education to feel accepted and worthy of their place working in higher education. With the landscape of higher education changing in modern society, Parkman (2016) suggests there is a need for institutions to recognise the feelings of IS amongst those working in HE and to instigate change. Questioning why academics and students may feel out of place and 'unable to take ownership' of their successes, Parkman (2016) addresses the institutions themselves to consider what they are proactively doing to make changes to help the way people working in them feel about themselves. Strategies to support these changes are shared in the second part of this article.

From the literature, it seems part of the problem with study at higher level is the 'vast knowledge' that students are expected to absorb and comprehend (Russell, 2017). Particularly in the case of medical students, such as in the case of physicians, where the development of clinical skills is key, there seems to be more likelihood of IS as expectations and responsibilities increase. As Russell (2017) warns, becoming a physician involves incremental progress toward competence and mastery; students should recognise and celebrate their progress along the way rather than focusing on any perceived shortcomings (Russell, 2017).

## Feeling burnout

So how can IS be a barrier to educational achievement? Burnout is just one psychological phenomena that can result from longitudinal stress and anxiety (Beusaert et al, 2016) As Turnipseed (2000) warns:

“the phases of burnout have different effects on critical organizational and social variables, such as job involvement, helplessness, job satisfaction, job tension, and productivity” (Turnipseed, 2000: 341)

Burnout, essentially, is when an individual become so saturated with stress that they can no longer fulfil their potential or carry out tasks efficiently (von Harscher et al, 2018). Symptoms of burnout may include academic fatigue, academic apathy, and academic inefficiency (Bikar et al, 2018). Studies into reducing burnout, one possible result of IS, shows that when a social support network is in place, levels of stress decrease and the likelihood of burnout is less (Beusaert et al, 2016: 347). Support can come from peers on the same degree programme, perhaps face to face or through social media such as WhatsApp messenger groups. Findings from studies into the wellbeing of first-year students (Boni et al, 2018) show that when students are academically and emotionally supported, we can see improved 'performance, motivation, optimism, and empathy' (Boni et al, 2018:85). It is essential that HE institutions consider support strategies to engage students in active participation and successful completion of their degree programmes.

Interestingly, research into burnout shows a line when it comes to individuals feeling passionate about what they do, a discrepancy between being 'harmoniously' or 'obsessively' passionate. Building on from previous research into burnout amongst teachers, Saville et al (2018) found that students who were harmoniously passionate about their academic activities experienced less burnout than obsessively passionate students, who, in turn, experienced less burnout than non-passionate students (Saville et al, 2018: 25). The authors of this article suggest that we should bear in mind these findings when considering the impact of IS on a student's engagement with their course; if a student feels unworthy of their place on their course, they may show present as being obsessively passionate as they try to compensate for the fear of not belonging, leading to stress, anxiety and resulting in burnout.

## How to promote engagement in HE

From reviewing the literature, it seems that there are ways that students' engagement can be encouraged, and that this engagement is the key to unlocking student success and potentially reducing the likelihood of experiencing IS. Five key strategies have been brought together and shared below, stressing the importance of

**reflection, feedback/feedforward, 'talk, support networks and perspective.**

## **The importance of reflection**

When an individual reflects on their experiences and draws on their perceptions of how others act towards them, this goes towards an individual constructing their identity (Mead 1934, Sullivan 1953, Erikson 1968). In our study, the experiences and interactions each young person has with their teachers, parents and peers are important for potentially affecting their thoughts and perceptions of how they are seen by others. The 'attitudes of others' are a determinant feature in an individual's thoughts on how they see their self. Central to this study is the question of how young people reflect on their identities during this critical transition period in their lives.

## **The importance of feedback/ feedforward**

Chapman (2015) shows the subtleties in helping to prevent Imposter Syndrome amongst students in HE. Lecturers can reassure students through informal discussion, direct and concise feedback, but also through explanation which is in a common language - one that is understandable to an undergraduate possibly rather than to a fellow professor! Suffers of IS experience anxiety, guilt, and self-doubt. Feedback may be useful for navigating these feelings, but only if it matches a physician's self-assessment; self-doubt and the imposter syndrome are examples of inaccurate self-assessments that may affect receptivity to feedback (LaDonna et al, 2017).

## **The importance of talk**

Self-doubt variably affects clinicians at all career stages. Frequent transitions may cause a resurgence of self-doubt that may affect feedback credibility. Medical educators must recognize that it is not just the underperforming or failing learners who struggle and require support, and medical culture must create space for physicians to share their struggles (LaDonna et al, 2017)

## **The importance of a support network**

IS can be addressed and turned around through a concerted effort. While that effort involves a personal journey, like any journey it is often aided and accompanied by others. Through strategic outreach efforts, academic libraries are positioned to be important players in that journey, helping these "imposters" renegotiate their self-images to include a sense of their essential place in academia and belief in their ability to successfully complete their academic goals (Ramsey and Brown, 2018).

## **The importance of perspective**

Persky's findings (2018) discuss the rules to reduce the impact of imposter syndrome, a form of intellectual self-doubt; these include separating one's feeling of stupidity from fact, learning to let go of mistakes and focusing on quality, not on quantity, as well as visualizing one's success through focusing on those things that went right (Persky, 2018). The authors of this paper suggest that HE students, therefore, are encouraged to focus on what is going well with their studies, and to be aware of their ipsative progress over the course of their degree programmes by following their grades and feedback as they progress. This links to the previous strategy of feedback; feedback must be personal enough and with specific targets that appreciate not only where a student has come from but also the steps they can move to next. For educators in HE, perspective can be encouraged amongst students through the use of personal tutoring, 1:1 meetings where students can discuss and reflect upon their progress and development of skills, and also through events such as student colloquiums, conferences or symposiums, events which the authors of this paper have held at their institution of employment to very positive feedback from students.

With these five strategies in mind, to help individuals overcome Imposter Syndrome Mount and Tardanico (2014) suggest people should

'Focus on the facts of success, and document what skills and techniques you possess, which helped you achieve those successes. Next you should identify and challenge your limiting beliefs. These beliefs may hold you back from really owning your accomplishments, because they give you an inaccurate picture of what success actually looks like'  
(Mount and Tardanico, 2014:1)

Mount and Tardanico (2014) go on to say that once an individual is 'clear on the strengths' they possess, instead of 'just focusing on your weaknesses' this will enable an individual to showcase their strengths. It is also recommended by Mount and Tardanico to seek assurances and reinforcement from others of your strengths as this will help an individual to 'obtain a clearer picture' of their skills and accomplishments. Obtaining external perspectives will also help an individual to expel their negative views of their own flaws and concentrate on seeing themselves as competent.

## Areas for further research

In an ever-changing society where technology is playing a larger part in HE studies, it is important for HE providers to consider how connecting with students online may provide added opportunity for engagement, such as through the use of appropriate social media tools, such as a programme 'Facebook' page, where students can connect with peers and share questions and ideas in a 'third space' (Soja, 1999).

The authors of this article propose further study should be conducted into different ways technology can be used to reduce IS in HE students; this could be possible by creating social media spaces, such as a student Facebook page or Twitter handle, running this over a longitudinal period and then gathering feedback from students about their lived experience of using such phenomenon.

Also, regarding BME data, the authors propose further study should be conducted relating specifically to BME students and IS through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, allowing for lived experiences of students to be shared in order to shed further light on this phenomenon (Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009). This is important as the literature analysed in this study showed that often students with low ethnic identity were more susceptible to feelings of IS. A study, therefore, is proposed to interview BME students on undergraduate programmes, support them with technological platforms as outlined above (i.e. Facebook or Twitter) and to consider how these impacted upon engagement and integration over time, if at all. This could then inform future use of social media as a tool for HE institutions.

## Summary

To summarise, perhaps it is never entirely possible to lose the 'fear', but instead it is about acknowledging the fear and accepting that fear in daily life (Giles, 2010: 23). As even the small scope of research in this one article highlights, Imposter Syndrome is common. It is impossible for those in Higher Education to fully measure or recognise those students suffering Imposter Syndrome, but as this article has highlighted, we can at least hope to understand some of the factors that may increase the likelihood of a student being at risk of IS. The key to helping students feel integral to their cohort, it seems, is to establish open dialogue both between students and staff, and also between students and their peers. Through clear and specific feedback (Chapman, 2015), the instillation of a support network within the HE setting (Ramsey and Brown, 2018), and the encouragement from HE staff to keep students motivated, engaged and to maintain a positive outlook through regular interaction (Mount and Tardanico, 2014), the impacts of IS may be reduced, or at least managed, so that students have enjoy the most positive experience during their studies, and reach graduation appreciating that they fully deserve to be wearing that mortarboard cap and gown.

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