

Imposter phenomenon and the early career researcher

Item Type	Research report
Authors	Cureton, Debra
Citation	Cureton, D. (2024) Imposter phenomenon and the early career researcher, in The lives of early career researchers, HEPI report 169, pp. 58-62. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute, 2024.
Publisher	Higher Education Policy Institute
Download date	2026-05-17 03:23:06
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/625490

Imposter Phenomenon and the Early Career Researcher

Debra Cureton, University of Wolverhampton

As an academic developer, I often speak with early career researchers who disclose that they are struggling, often in silence, with 'imposter phenomenon'.¹ Many think that they are the only ones who feel this way, and that their colleagues and peers are confident, focused and free from the angst they are experiencing. This essay considers what imposter phenomenon is thought to be, what it actually is, why we experience it and what we can do to challenge these feelings. The essay will close with some ideas about what institutions can do to support early career researchers and reduce imposter phenomenon in higher education.

What is imposter phenomenon?

Imposter phenomenon was first written about in 1978 by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Ines. They identified that many high-achieving women experienced 'Imposter Phenomenon' defined as 'an internal experience of [being] intellectual phonies' despite being highly qualified, having significant work experience, and being very successful.² As more work was carried out in the area, the definition was developed to include not being able to recognise or internalise success, persistent feelings of anxiety, depression, self-doubt, attributing success to luck and apprehension of being exposed as a fraud. It is likely that approximately 80 per cent of us will experience imposter phenomenon at some point, and while phenomenon can be experienced by everyone, it is women and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds who are most likely to experience it.³

At some point, imposter phenomenon was pathologised and called a syndrome, despite it not formally recognised as a medical condition or mental disorder. This pathologising may be because of links to burnout, depression, anxiety and exacerbation of other behavioural issues, as well as relationships between imposter phenomenon to family upbringing and high levels of family conflict.⁴

Not all research into the causes of imposter phenomenon links to individual pathology. There is evidence that imposter phenomenon is generated

through social situations, such as gender stereotyping or because of periods of transition.⁷ However, a search of the internet will bring up reams of articles, blogs and videos that blame imposter phenomenon on individual traits, and often link it to psychopathology while acknowledging that it is 'not yet diagnosable'. In making such links, those who experience imposter phenomenon are left fearing that they are not good enough, as well as being told this is because they are faulty in some way.

Imposter phenomenon among early career researchers

Not all authors agree that imposter phenomenon is an individual trait. Indeed, some argue it is a feeling of not belonging in a particular space, place or within a group of individuals.⁸ Higher education, for example, is a space that has been built on centuries of male-centric, predominantly westernised elitism. In some interpretations, universities were designed by the ruling classes to educate the sons of the elite. Despite years of working on being more inclusive – for many – academia still feels like a homogenous space that has an unconscious elitist bias.⁹ And in being so it is not a comfortable space for all. It is not always sensitive to diversity and sometimes expects occupants to assimilate to biased and institutionally racist, homophobic, ableist and sexist norms.¹⁰

University practices have been built on and ingrained with centuries old beliefs, ideals and norms that grew from the practices, language, capital and culture of their original intended occupants: White elite males. It is not surprising that female and ethnic minority academics are less likely to become professors than White male academics. Meanwhile, ethnic minority and disabled applicants for doctoral studies are less likely to be successful.¹¹ So early career researchers who are working class, first in their family to study in higher education, female, disabled, LGBTQ+ or from BAME backgrounds, often feel that they are in a space that is not made for them and is unwelcoming. It is unsurprising that many feel like an imposter and internalise this feeling to one of not being good enough for the space, when in reality it is the space that is not welcoming enough.

What can early career researchers do to challenge feelings of imposter phenomenon?

If we accept that imposter phenomenon is about place and not about the person, there is a lot that individuals can do. First, think about when imposter phenomenon is experienced – where, when and with whom does this occur? Look for the trends. Compare this to when imposter phenomenon is not experienced, to identify what the differences are in the situation. This might give some clues to why and where imposter phenomenon is experienced. Recognise the feelings involved with imposter phenomenon and accept that this is not about the individual but the lack of inclusivity within the environment. Talk to others about imposter phenomenon – it is surprising who else experiences it. Talking to them about how they manage it might provide some useful techniques. Colleagues are also a useful source of feedback on performance, so get feedback from trusted individuals and believe the good things that they say. Negative self-talk is our worst enemy. Examine self-talk, accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. Remember the things that you do well, be kind to yourself and celebrate your successes, however small you think they are. Finally, take action. Challenging the status quo makes it easier for others to do so too.

But what can organisations do in the long term to value diversity and help early career researchers feel that they belong?

The first step is to evaluate institutional culture.¹² When, where and how does a lack of diversity show itself? Work with minoritised groups to eliminate it, including early career researchers. It is also important to foster an organisation philosophy where every voice is encouraged, valued and listened to. When issues are raised, respect it and act on it. Do not prejudge the issue especially when these are raised by younger or less experienced colleagues, such as early career researchers. They may have an innovative solution that you might not have thought about. Also be open, honest and transparent about any areas of your organisation where a lack of inclusivity exists, and about the plans to tackle this. Include a diverse staff group in the related work groups and ensure that early career researchers are included.

A diverse leadership encourages a diverse culture but also allows early career researchers from all communities to feel a sense of organisational belonging. So evaluate the diversity of leadership on a regular basis, especially after periods of reorganisation. Finally, words matter, so it is critical that you review all your policy and documentation to ensure inclusive language is utilised. Where early career researchers are concerned, it is imperative that all promotional documentations are inclusive, so they can see a promotion pathway and therefore a place for themselves within the organisation.

Conclusion

Tackling the lack of diversity in higher education is critical on so many levels. An inclusive and diverse higher education will help liberate many of us from the negative impact of imposter phenomenon, especially those early into their careers. It will increase organisational belonging and, through this, motivation, productivity and quality of experience, while also reducing staff turnover. Additionally, it will increase the likelihood of retaining talented individuals who aspire to a career in teaching and research in higher education. More importantly, it is only through an inclusive higher education sector that our full potential can be met. If we allow all those involved in higher education (students and staff) to be confident to share all that they have to offer, we can grow stronger and progress in the future. It is only through welcoming diversity and being more inclusive that higher education can offer a representative, inclusive, diverse and transformational experience for students and staff, at all levels.

Endnotes

- 1 Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, 'The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, Volume 15, Issue 3, 1978, pp.241-247 <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fh0086006>
- 2 Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, 'The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, Volume 15, Issue 3, 1978, pp.241-247 <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fh0086006>
- 3 Dena Bravata et al, 'Prevalence, Predictors, and Treatment of Impostor Syndrome: a Systematic Review', *Journal of General International Medicine*, Volume 35, Issue 4, 2020, pp.1252-1275 [doi: 10.1007/s11606-019-05364-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05364-1)

- 4 Martin Huecker et al, 'Imposter Phenomenon', *StatPearls [Internet]*, 2022 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK585058/>;
- 5 Sijia Li et al, 'The Links Between Parenting Styles and Imposter Phenomenon', *PSI CHI Journal of Psychological Research*, Volume 19, Issue 2, 2014, pp.50-57 <https://www.psichi.org/page/192JNSummer2014>
- 5 Joe Langford and Pauline Clance, 'The imposter phenomenon: Recent research findings regarding dynamics, personality and family patterns and their implications for treatment', *Psychotherapy Theory Research, Practice and Training*, Volume 30, Issue 3, 1993, pp.495-501 <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2F0033-3204.30.3.495>
- 7 Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, 'The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, Volume 15, Issue 3, 1978, pp.241-247 <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fh0086006>
Kirsten Weir, 'Feel like a fraud?', *American Psychological Association*, Volume 11, Issue 4, 2013
- 8 Michelle Addison et al, *The Palgrave Handbook of Imposter Syndrome in Higher Education*, 2022
- 9 Gilbert Caluya et al, "'Affective Eduscapes": the case of Indian students within Australian international higher education', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Volume 41, Issue 1, 2011, pp. 85–99 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233044134_%27Affective_eduscapes%27_the_case_of_Indian_students_within_Australian_international_higher_education
- 10 Heidi Safia Mirza, 'Racism in Higher Education: What Then, Can Be Done?', in Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (eds), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy*, 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60261-5>
- 11 HESA, *Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2022/23*, 2024 [Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2022/23 | HESA](https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-figures/higher-education-staff-statistics-uk-2022-23);
HESA, *Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2022/23*, 2024 [Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2022/23 | HESA](https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-figures/higher-education-staff-statistics-uk-2022-23);
Sean Coughlan, 'Only 1% of UK university professors are black', *BBC News Online*, 19 January 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55723120>;
Kendall Powell, 'Academia's ableist mindset needs to change', *Nature*, 25 October 2021 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02907-7>
- 12 Brianne Kent et al, 'Recommendations for empowering early career researchers to improve research culture and practice', *PLoS Biology*, Volume 20, Issue 7, 2022 [10.1371/journal.pbio.3001680](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3001680)