

Learning from experience: Mitigating imposter phenomena in academia

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The process of transitioning into new roles within academia often engenders a profound culture shock, accompanied by pervasive feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, commonly referred to as imposter phenomenon. These sentiments persist despite the accumulation of years of education, experience and notable accomplishments. The imposter phenomenon exerts a detrimental influence, leading to elevated stress levels and burnout, reduced productivity and diminished job satisfaction among academic newcomers. These negative consequences, in turn, may hinder effective career planning, dampen motivation for leadership roles and impede the full development of an academic identity.

This paper presents a personal narrative describing the author's experience of navigating the foreign and uncertain academic environment during their transition. The narrative explores a range of strategies employed to combat the imposter phenomenon, including heightened self-awareness, mentorship relationships, support from institutional networks, solicitation of recognition and feedback, active pursuit of professional development and the cultivation of self-compassion.

Recognising the pervasive impact of imposter phenomenon, this narrative underscores the importance of providing robust support structures for new academics. Such support systems hold the potential to enhance retention rates and foster deeper engagement within the academic community, nurturing the formation of both personal and professional identities among emerging scholars.

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Entering a new career or position is a challenging experience, especially for those transitioning into academia after achieving success in another field. This shift often requires the adoption of new roles, vocabulary and technological skills while developing as both an educator and researcher. Despite years of education, experience and accomplishments, transitioning into academia can feel like a culture shock, often accompanied by self-doubt and inadequacy. These feelings are defined as imposter phenomenon (IP), a psychological pattern in which individuals question their worth and inclusion, and fear being exposed as frauds.^[1] This article aims to provide a reflection and identify strategies to mitigate the IP. The lead author writes from her own experience transitioning from clinical practice expert to early-career nursing academic.

IP in academia

Transitioning into academia can be daunting, with preconceptions of the 'ivory tower' and feelings of isolation. This sense of being alone in struggling with self-doubt can intensify the feelings of being an imposter, making it harder to seek support or share these experiences with others.^[2] Early-career academics are particularly vulnerable to IP when they engage in self-evaluation and compare themselves to colleagues or established experts in their field. Such comparisons can fuel feelings of inadequacy and the belief that others are more accomplished or deserving than themselves.^[3]

The lack of feedback or recognition for their own body of work, especially in the early stages of an academic career, can also contribute to imposter feelings. Many look to their supervisors for support, and when feedback, validation or positive reinforcement is lacking, individuals may question their competence and credibility, deepening their self-doubt.^[4]

Impact of IP on academics

For early-career academics, IP increases stress and burnout, reduces productivity and diminishes job satisfaction.^[5] Self-doubt, associated with fear of failure, fear of success and low self-esteem,^[6] can also create challenges in managing work-life balance.

Individuals experiencing self-doubt engage in less career planning, show decreased motivation to lead and struggle to fully develop their academic identity, limiting their potential. These negative emotions of inadequacy and self-doubt lead to high turnover rates among new academics, exacerbating the global shortage of educators.

IP also affects the teaching and learning environment. Teaching insecurity arises when novice educators doubt their own knowledge and instructional expertise, decreasing their confidence and effectiveness. Teaching insecurity can lead to overcompensation, where educators excessively prepare, contributing to burnout and negatively impacting teaching quality.^[7] Student-teacher relationships are also impacted as academics struggle to overcome insecurities, making it harder to establish credibility with learners. This can undermine their ability to effectively engage and inspire students, ultimately stifling the learning experience.^[8]

Imposter feelings may promote perfectionistic tendencies, with new academics setting unrealistic expectations and working excessive hours to avoid perceived mistakes or shortcomings. Fearing they will appear incompetent, they may hesitate to seek help or use resources that could improve their teaching, further hindering their professional development as educators.^[8]

IP is prevalent in academia, with 72% of academic staff experiencing frequent to intense feelings of being an imposter, a rate higher among women.^[9] However, there are limited studies, especially in the health

professions. Estimates suggest that 43.8% of internal medicine students report experiencing IP,^[8] while 76% of general surgery residents experience high levels of it.^[10] There is a need to recognise the economic and psychological impact of IP on individuals in academia. Academic institutions can implement strategies to ease the transition of early-career academics, fostering a sense of belonging.

Strategies to reduce IP

Recognising and addressing IP in academia is crucial to creating a positive and supportive work environment. Orientation programmes for new faculty should be more deliberate in addressing transition needs, not only focusing on job-related aspects but also addressing psychological challenges and role adaptation.

IP awareness

Efforts to increase awareness of IP among early-career academics can reduce the stigma and help normalise the associated feelings. Offering workshops or training sessions for faculty and administrators that cover the concept, prevalence and impact of IP on individuals, the organisation and academic success can ease the transition into new roles and expectations.

Support networks

Academic institutions should be intentional in creating spaces and support networks where individuals can openly share their experiences and feelings related to IP. These shared spaces provide opportunities for individuals to discuss their stories, challenges and coping strategies, mitigating feelings of loneliness through support and validation with opportunities to learn from others' experiences.

Mentorship

Mentorship programmes are valuable assets in higher education institutions providing guidance, support and encouragement. Mentors help mentees plan their academic journey and provide valuable feedback, validation and perspective. Early-career academics should seek a diverse group of mentors who can support their professional development, provide emotional support, offer access to networks, give project-specific feedback and provide institutional sponsorship. Institutions have a responsibility to develop mentors who are knowledgeable about IP and equipped to help new academics navigate the challenges of academia.

Recognition and feedback

Deliberate efforts should be made to provide early-career academics with regular, constructive feedback on their progress toward goals. Sharing systematic reflection on their experiences with supervisors and mentors increases self-awareness, helping individuals develop a more accurate self-assessment. This process builds confidence in their abilities and fosters growth in their academic careers.

Professional development

Academic institutions have a responsibility to provide professional development opportunities that equip early-career academics with the knowledge and skills necessary for building successful academic careers. Emphasising a growth mindset fosters resilience, mindfulness, reframing mistakes as opportunities and cultivating self-compassion - strategies that have been proven to enhance

growth and development.^[11] Expertise develops over time through effort and reflection on experience, and these strategies can promote effective self-management, reducing the tendency to overwork.

Self-compassion

Creating an organisational culture of self-compassion is essential, enabling individuals to be kind to themselves, embrace imperfections and recognise their inherent worth beyond achievements. Encouraging self-reflection and gratitude journaling can help individuals explore their emotions, make sense of their experiences and foster awareness of others. This practice encourages individuals to step outside of their own perspectives and appreciate that everyone faces challenges at some point in their journey, reinforcing the notion that they are not alone.

Conclusion

Transitioning into academia can be a challenging experience, requiring adjustments to new roles, responsibilities and culture. Recognising IP is the first step in mitigating these feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Higher education institutions must address the transition needs of new academic members beyond job-related aspects by offering psychological support strategies. Providing this support will improve retention and catalyse engagement in institutional life, fostering both personal and professional identity. Creating a psychologically safe environment where doubts and fears are validated allows new academic members to manage their expectations and emotions effectively, enabling them to build and sustain a productive academic career.

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