

‘I don’t belong here’: Underrepresented students and their ‘imposter syndrome’ in higher education

Project website: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/education-research/our-work/identities-in-education/sidus/>

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Supporting the Identity Development of Underrepresented Students (SIDUS) Project

Aims:

- to promote **inclusion** and **supporting success** for STEMM students from **underrepresented groups**; fostering a diverse and inclusive academic community for all
 - to **empower** and **inspire** underrepresented students to cultivate a **sense of belonging** to the academic community & their **academic and professional identity**
-

SIDUS project data

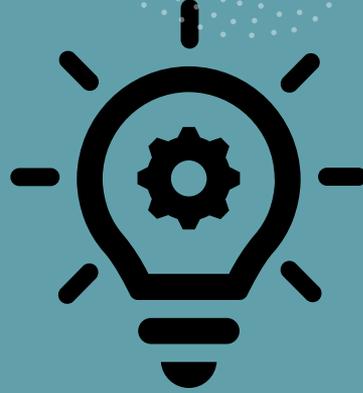
- 110 in-depth interviews with STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine) students from underrepresented groups:
 - ✓ 'BAME' (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic)
 - ✓ First-generation and/or working class
 - ✓ Mature (age 21 years or older on university entry)
 - ✓ LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, queer, and any other minoritised gender and sexuality groups)
 - ✓ Disabled students
 - ✓ Women



How does being 'underrepresented' affect students' identities and career aspirations at university?

- Questions covered in the interview:
 - ✓ Sense of belonging in general
 - ✓ Disciplinary 'typical or ideal' students
 - ✓ Future career planning and future professional selves
 - ✓ Experiences of being 'underrepresented'
- Data analysis – 'imposter syndrome' present in 37 of 110 interviews:
 - ✓ 10 students discussed imposter syndrome explicitly in the interviews
 - ✓ 27 students discussed feelings that we defined as imposter feelings
 - ✓ Imposter feelings can impede the development of a sense of belonging

Which words/phrases come into your mind when you hear about this term 'imposter syndrome'? Please share your thoughts in the 'chat' area.



Defining 'Imposter Syndrome'



Image: soundgirls.org

persistently feeling like one is a fraud despite achievements and successes, often with the fear that one will be found out and exposed as not being worthy to be in a space or to have certain accolades

Rooted in 'imposter phenomenon' (Clance & Imes, 1978)

Sociological Intervention – Discrimination & Structures Matter

'Impostor syndrome' is a pseudo-medical name for a class problem

Nathalie Olah

Let's stop using this shifty term. It just encourages people to blame themselves for deep structural unfairness



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Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome

by [Ruchika Tulshyan](#) and [Jodi-Ann Burey](#)

February 11, 2021



Imposter Syndrome is Classed

David:

“I’ve sort of always felt like **I’m a bit too thick to be here** if that makes sense, I feel like I **don’t sound or look the part** to be at a world-class university ... A lot of it is to do with my **accent**, I struggle to speak in a way that people can fully understand sometimes because my accent is a bit strong. I feel like people use – it's going to make me sound a bit thick – but people use long words and they’ve tend to have learnt a lot of things at school that I never did, we were taught to the specification and nothing beyond that. Most **other people seemed to have had a much broader education.**”

Imposter Syndrome is Classed, cont'd

Selma: “I’m just this poor, working-class person in this very elite university. I don’t really belong here, and I’ve got to work extra hard to prove that I do.”

“I never really thought about how my working-class thing, like being working class and first generation might have compounded into that [imposter syndrome]. I thought it was more like a question of my intelligence and my IQ, but it is actually also a social thing.”



Image: Dom Fou, Unsplash.com

Imposter Syndrome is Classed, cont'd



Image: Vecteezy.com

Chiara: “I’d say, yes. Nothing has made me feel really out of place. I don’t, what I’m trying to say, I suppose, it’s just everyone there is very smart and sometimes you think, oh, that kind of **imposter syndrome**, but you just ... **I think a lot of people probably feel that and you have to just get over it basically**”

Zosia: “obviously there is some kind of imposter syndrome coming in, and everybody loves biology ... suddenly you’re not the only person in the year group who loves biology. So that was something ... **It was exciting**, and I felt welcome.”

Racism and Black Students

Beatrice:

“they just accepted me because they needed to accept someone from an ethnic minority. A black person. I still think that to this day actually”

Kolo:

“almost as though you don’t deserve to be here or you’re here by fluke”



LEADING ROUTES 

Leadingroutes.org

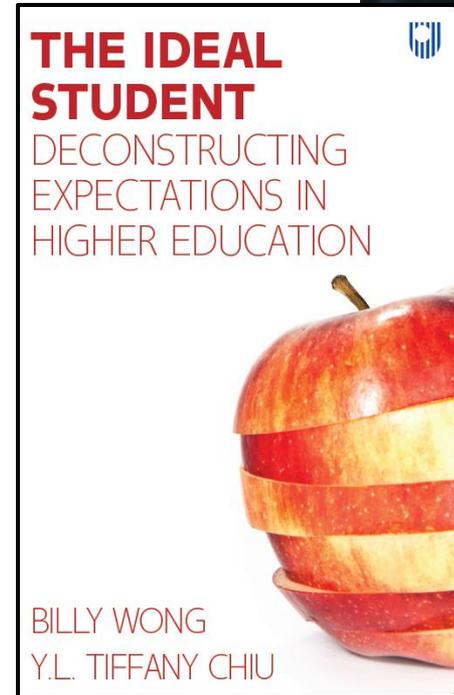
Pedagogical implications

- Students experience imposter syndrome differently depending on their intersecting structural identities and how underrepresented they are in particular spaces.
- Imposter syndrome can be a diversity and inclusion issue.
- Collective spaces of belonging helped manage imposter syndrome:
 - ✓ Friendship groups
 - ✓ Student societies where they could meet students ‘like them’ or with an inclusive group identity



Pedagogical implications, cont'd

- Managing student expectations and understanding of what it means to be a university student (e.g. not to be afraid of making mistakes/asking questions; imposter feelings can be very common)
- Transparency in expectations plays a key role to reduce inequalities caused by assumptions.
- The ideal student survey as a tool for student induction and welcome week



Further information

- Project website: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/education-research/our-work/identities-in-education/sidus/>
- Wong, B. & Chiu, Y.L.T. (2021). *The ideal student: Deconstructing expectations in higher education*. London: Open University Press. More details [here](#) (Book launch 7th July @13.00)
- Any questions or would like to know more about the project?

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