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Academic Impostor Syndrome: Supporting learners to overcome self-doubt

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Impostor syndrome is defined as self-doubt with feelings of inadequacy in the context of educational achievement (La Donna et al., 2018). Feelings of being an impostor have been reported across the academic lifespan from undergraduates (Maftei et al., 2021), through postgraduates (Chakraverty, 2020; Sverdlik et al., 2020), and onto professionals working in academia (Muradoglu et al., 2021). High achievers may be most vulnerable to impostor syndrome (Holden et al., 2021), and may attribute their accomplishments to external factors (Bravata, et al., 2020). In addition, upbringing may influence impostor syndrome; on the one hand there may be the pressure of high expectations from a high achieving family, while at the other extreme is the challenge of being the first generation individual to encounter the university experience (Phillips, et al. 2020). Feeling like an impostor can be context dependent (Feenstra et al., 2020) and it is frequently found in academic professionals across disciplines (Vázquez, (2022), particularly with those from under-represented groups (Muradoglu et al., 2021).

Impostor syndrome in students is likely to debilitate confidence and undermine wellbeing (Collins et al., 2020) and lead to problems with enrolment, retention, progression, integration, and success (Chrouses & Mentis, 2020). Such a range of debilitating issues warrant attention, with the intention of raising awareness of the phenomenon within the student population. The imposter symptoms can be eased for those affected by being able to talk about their experiences (TES, 2018) and by becoming more aware of negative self-talk and amending the language used.

Although impostor syndrome is often applied to students, it was initially developed as a general concept, so I have developed a measure specifically to assess academic impostor syndrome in students. This academically specific measure will yield more specificity in capturing the cluster of cognitions, emotions and behaviours that need to be targeted to signpost progression. The issue will be more effectively countered when it is addressed within the academic community and not merely by individual students. Thus, the proposal is to embed the measure into student tutorial sessions, as a catalyst for discussing and diminishing feelings of impostorism.

