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When Will My Cover Be Blown? The Experience of Imposter Syndrome in Emerging and Early Career Academics/Educators

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INTRODUCTION
What is imposter syndrome?
Fraid, lack, doubt, and incompetence – these terms describe the thoughts and feelings frequently endured during an internal process known as “imposter syndrome.” The syndrome was first described in 1978, after two female psychologists observed a consistent constellation of symptoms and concerns in 150 highly successful women (Clance & Imes, 1978). Despite successful completion of advanced degrees, obtaining high scores on standardized aptitude tests, and holding various leadership positions, many of the women appeared unable to internalise their success and expressed strong feelings of inadequacy and incompetency (Hoang, 2015). Furthermore, the majority of these women attributed failure to internal traits, but associated success to external factors such as luck, good fortune, exerting more time and effort into a task rather than possessing natural ability or interpersonal strengths such as charm and adaptability which were perceived to manipulate the impression and expectation of those around them (Langford & Clance, 1993). Consequently, these women strongly anticipated failure and feared exposure of their “phrenesis.” The women also tended to re-internalise the inferred and ability of others, while underestimating their own competence and knowledge (Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008).

Imposter syndrome in higher education
Imposter syndrome (syndrome) affects individuals with particular psychological traits, such as self-doubt, perfectionism, and a fear of failure, who often possess perfectionistic tendencies in relation to work and personal attributes, and hold various doubt of their competence (Went & Kielhofen, 2005), similar to that of an academic environment. These traits may be exacerbated in tertiary education settings where an academic culture places a high emphasis on performance (e.g., valuing over process performance), targets can be vague and/or inconsistent, support and mentorship is often lacking, discipline nationalism is common, and competition to be academic is a high research funding and grants is high (Zorn, 2005). Not surprisingly, this environment (whether intended or unintended) can conduce to feelings of self-doubt and frustration, providing an ideal setting for imposter syndrome to flourish, often silently. This can lead to significant and unfavourable impacts on individual faculty members, departments, and the wider community.

The current project
Although the experience of imposter syndrome is thought to be widespread in tertiary education, to date, there has been relatively little investigation into the experience of imposter syndrome in emerging or early career academics involved in teaching. This is particularly important given the perceived prestige and perfection of tertiary educators and the notion of academia as a meritocracy based purely on academic brilliance.

Accordingly, the present FULT project explored three research questions:
1. Do academics at Bond University in the emerging or early stages of their career experience or identify with imposter syndrome?
2. How do emerging or early career academics manage or cope with imposter or fraudulent feelings (i.e., what strategies have been helpful)?
3. What strategies at an institutional level do emerging or early career academics believe would or would have been helpful to assist them manage these feelings?

Measures
Academics were asked to provide any insights regarding the experience of imposter syndrome in an informal manner (via email or in person). Prompts such as the management of imposter thoughts and feelings, advantages for others, and any perceived supports to overcome the experience, were provided. All answers were responses were qualitative in nature.

Analysis Procedure
A general inductive approach outlined by Thomas (2006) was utilised to evaluate the qualitative responses.

RESULTS
Of the 11 academics, 10 reported experiencing imposter syndrome (90%), or associated fraudulent feelings, in relation to teaching on a regular basis (at least weekly, if not daily). Consulted literature, the majority of participating academics perceived luck, chance, fortune, and opportunistic timing (all external factors) to be the main reason for obtaining their teaching role. Issues related to self-doubt, not being “good enough”, young, inexperienced, lacking in credibility, and upward social comparison were common and contributed significantly to imposter thoughts and feelings, despite each participant possessing several advanced degrees and numerous academic achievements.

People talk about me being an ‘educator’ or an ‘academic’ – I really don’t see myself as either – I don’t feel I deserve that label. ‘Tutor’ is probably the best description, even the term ‘teaching fellow’ on my contract seems like something I should ‘earn’, but there are no guidelines for that.

Institutional supports perceived to be beneficial were largely related to mentorship and academic support groups, with the main aim of providing a safe space for debate regarding imposter syndrome to normalize the experience and foster working relationships. Greater integration of new staff members, and the introduction of or more regular staff meetings were also perceived to be helpful in establishing one’s identity as an “academic.” Professional development opportunities to cultivate fundamental teaching skills and knowledge were considered vital in increasing confidence and reducing self-doubt. Interestingly, several academics emphasised one must recognize and acknowledge imposter thoughts and feelings before any attempts to challenge or modify the experience can occur. It was suggested this could be achieved through reflective practice.

It would have been beneficial to go through a peer review process earlier in my teaching career to get feedback and see how others cope in the classroom first-hand. For someone in the same group and really benefiting from the experience.

Discussion
The insights and information obtained in this action research project contribute to the growing body of literature surrounding imposter syndrome in higher education, particularly emerging and early career academics. Although exploratory and preliminary in nature, results of the project indicated the experience of imposter syndrome was common, frequent and persistent in a group of emerging and early career academics at Bond University. Further inquiry into this area has specific implications for accelerating emerging and early career academics, improving faculty or departmental climate, and hopefully enhancing performance and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Strategies to manage or overcome imposter syndrome could be broadly divided into helpful and unhelpful. Helpful strategies included sharing the imposter experience and obtaining feedback from trusted others, reassessing feedback and positive reinforcement from supervisors or senior academics, identifying and challenging imposter thoughts with evidence, and developing rational and balanced thoughts using perspectives. Overcompensation and extensive preparation was also perceived to be helpful for some academics (e.g., increasing confidence), however, this strategy also functioned as safety behaviour, resulting in increased anxiety and emotional exhaustion. Diagnosis and extraction from one’s ego was also perceived to be a helpful strategy in some cases, and unhelpful in others.

I cope with these feelings of inadequacy by overcompensating and over-preparing. I never go into a class, be it a lecture or tutorial, without having rehearsed the context several times (my minimum is three rehearsals). It’s very time consuming and emotionally draining.

KEY REFERENCES