

# 336 Feeling like a rabbit in headlights – Experiencing and dealing with imposter phenomenon in Higher Education

Andrea Lane<sup>1</sup>, Vicky MountfordBrown<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom. <sup>2</sup>Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

Whilst the expansion of entrepreneurial education programmes globally places emphasis on developing and nurturing the talents of students and researchers, we focus on the need to attract and develop enterprising talents to teach the subject and guide learners in realising their potential. Enterprise and entrepreneurship education in UK Higher Education teaches and supports learners with a diverse spectrum of those taking the role of 'educator' (spanning various practitioner and research-focussed 'career types') from entrepreneurs and industry professionals, to academics, often from very different disciplinary backgrounds.

This paper draws on qualitative data situating the prominence of 'Imposter Phenomenon' voiced in the dialogues of educators from different career types in this field, and their strategies to manage a sense of disjuncture and struggles for (self-perceived) legitimacy. As such, we emphasise the complexities in educator identities in 'becoming' an entrepreneurial educator, suggesting professional development opportunities suitable to address feeling like an imposter.

## Full paper

With the expansion of entrepreneurial education programs across universities (Winkel, 2013; Jones et al., 2018; Kiškis & Kiškienė, 2021) the need for enterprising talents teaching the subject has increased. Yet, the EEE's profile and perspectives have been left largely unexplored (Steiner, 2014; Neck & Corbett, 2018; Wraae & Walmsley, 2020; Wraae et al., 2022). Specifically, whilst Imposter Phenomenon (IP) has a strong resonance within academia (Addison et al, 2022; Breeze, 2019; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016), the role of this often-debilitating phenomena in the experiences of Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Educators (EEEs) remains relatively unexplored. In a burgeoning field of enquiry and a teaching subject/approach, professional practitioners and entrepreneurs often take on the role of educator in entrepreneurship and enterprise education, and academics from other disciplines such as marketing or economics are drawn upon to teach the subject (Bennett, 2006, Finkle, 2007; Schleinkofer & Kulicke, 2009; Trivedi, 2014). We argue that those working within this context offer particularly interesting perspectives on the processes of 'becoming' EEEs and enable a critical reflection on 'legitimacy' in academia for educators more broadly.

Data examined in this paper draws the competencies EEEs must develop to perform the role, highlighting a typography of EEEs as 'professional' or 'academic', career types. The data exploration specifically around the theme of IP was thematically analyzed across 19 semi-structured interviews with EEEs based in England. Originally, the term 'Imposter phenomenon' is rooted Clance and Imes' (1978) psychological exploration of high-achieving women who expressed a sense of 'intellectual phoniness' and a palpable sense of 'not being good enough'; and over time the more medicalized/individualized term of 'imposter syndrome' has gained prominence. In this research however, we conceptualise the phenomenon sociologically, as 'imposterism'; as shared, context-specific phenomena enacted in practice. Academia, broadly speaking, is represented with strong associations of intellectualism, situating 'the university' as a space for intelligent, confident individuals who know 'the rules of engagement' in a sociocultural and embodied sense i.e. they know how to 'do', 'act' and 'behave' in these contexts (Addison, 2016; Mountford-Brown, 2022). However, EEEs' experiences troubled this sense of 'confidence' and of 'knowing' the 'rules of engagement' and furthermore, detailed strategies to help to manage the phenomena.

One of the key experiences of EEEs in both academic and professional services roles was feeling like an imposter during their initial employment period, or in their 'becoming' stage. The phase of becoming is conceptualized as encompassing the period of entering the profession and the first few years on the job. Despite rich antecedent experiences including those as an entrepreneur, working in industry, or completing a PhD, the sense of not quite fitting or being 'enough' became palpable across different EEE experiences over the course of the first year on-the-job. During this period, many EEEs realised that their antecedent competences had a 'shelf-life' (Eggers et al., 2012; Pierce et al., 2015; Škrinjarčić, 2022) and while useful to get the job, the same skills are insufficient to perform the job. To build legitimacy, professional EEEs emphasized their entrepreneurial experience to show 'they have walked the talk' and to show they are qualified to deliver entrepreneurial education. Academic EEEs tended to rely more on sharing educational achievements (doctorates) to achieve legitimacy, not having the 'real world' entrepreneurial experience. However, if they had antecedent professional or entrepreneurial experiences, they also assetise them.

As EEEs perceived limitations of their antecedent capabilities, they identified specific learning needs and professional development opportunities to address these. All participants focused on the development of teaching and learning skills and the most frequently identified was the need to enhance their socio-cultural or contextual knowledge (Zuboff, 1988), i.e., their understanding of the processes, politics, and practices in HE, and their theoretical subject knowledge of entrepreneurship (education). For all EEEs, peer learning with immediate colleagues (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Moraes and Borges-Andrade, 2014; Watkins et al., 2018) and non-formal learning by immersion in the wider EEE community (traversing disciplinary and institutional boundaries) are crucial competence – and confidence – development opportunities. For academic EEEs, immediate disciplinary colleagues were important for informal peer-learning and in creating a sense of belonging and forming pedagogical content knowledge through conversations, observations, and sharing of materials (Orlander et al., 2000; Tovar et al., 2015; Beaton, 2021). Contrary, professional EEEs, emphasised the importance of attending short peer-learning events external to the organisation but similarly working across different disciplinary boundaries that exist institutionally. These results regarding the competence development of EEEs at this stage confirmed a social view of learning (Cseh et al., 1999; Scheeres et al., 2010) is crucial.

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