**The experience of Imposter Syndrome in First-Generation University Honours students and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

**The Inspiration**

Imposter syndrome is experienced by many individuals, but it can be seen frequently in first-generation university students. These are students who are the first in their immediate families to attend university and may not receive the same support that continuing-generation students would. Previous literature has found imposter syndrome to not be a stable personality trait, but a psychological experience exacerbated by transitional periods that often deduce feelings of stress and anxiety- like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Imposter syndrome is described as a lack of belonging and feeling like you are not qualified to be in the position you are in, despite evidence indicating the opposite. It can manifest as a fear of being exposed as a fraud or letting others down. In first-generation university students, imposter syndrome can become a present feature of their everyday university life, as they may lack role models or support systems that can help them navigate the new and often daunting experience of university life.

As a first-generation Honours student myself who often experiences symptoms of imposter syndrome at university, I was excited to find out if my feelings were universal for other students like me, or if more was at play than my first-generation status.

Furthermore, as imposter syndrome is a predictor of mental health concerns in university students such as anxiety and depression, a deeper understanding of the instance and likelihood of imposter syndrome in specific cohorts can better inform intervention strategies for mental health services. This is also of high importance considering the ongoing battle against the mental health crisis in young people and higher education.

**The Research**

As previous literature focuses mostly on the transitional period for students going from secondary school to university, or early years in university education, this study aimed to find out the experience of imposter syndrome in Level 3 and Level 4 (Honours) students. These students were of particular interest given they would have experience university before, during and after the pandemic, making for easier comparison.

With this in mind, I carried out one-to-one structured interviews and utilised reflexive thematic analysis to extract codes and themes relevant to the research question, whilst also acknowledging my active role as a first-generation Honours student myself. The research question was:

* To investigate the experience of imposter syndrome in Level 3 and 4 university honours students, and if this experience was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**The Results**

15 students aged between 18 and 25 were recruited (~87% women, ~73% completing a STEM degree, ~66% Level 4 students). The themes found through the reflexive analysis were:

* Participants based achievement on luck and lacked belonging amongst peers of a perceived higher social class, despite acknowledging they did work hard for the grades or accolades they have
* However, belonging improved with time and experience
* In a recruitment pool of mostly STEM students, a large emphasis was placed on self-efficacy amounting to overall success. Without self-efficacy, there is often self-doubt, a key attribute of imposter syndrome.
* Participants found a community where they could throughout the pandemic such as tutorial groups or the small cohort of students who returned to campus accommodation following the introduction of social distancing measures, developing an ‘all in this together mentality’ as their academic life filled the void left by lack of socialisation
* Participants appreciated 1 to 1 support before, during and after the pandemic, feeling less like a face on a screen and more a student with value.
* Motivation is more often pressure- participants experience unique pressures as first-generation students and heightened fears of letting their families down
* very often cultural pressures also worsened fears and levels of imposter syndrome when they did not achieve what they or their cultures deemed to be a success

**The Next Steps**

* Intersectionality
* Results demonstrate varied experiences in imposter syndrome not only based on first-generation status but on cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic and gender-based influences. Future research should aim to understand if a student is discriminated against based primarily on factors such as class or ethnicity, and first-generation student status second.
* Conducting this same study but recruiting both first-generation and continuing-generation students could inform differences and similarities in student experience, and therefore the resources and support needed to support both demographics.