



IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND SENIOR ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP IN UK BUSINESS SCHOOLS

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Cite this article:

W. I., Boumsoud, B.,
Zaghmout, I., Maazouz, Y.,
Suleiman (2026), Imposter
Syndrome and Senior
Academic Leadership in UK
Business Schools. British
Journal of Management and
Marketing Studies 9(1), 34-47.
DOI: 10.52589/BJMMS-
6DQCCEUS

Manuscript History

Received: 3 Dec 2025

Accepted: 6 Jan 2026

Published: 26 Jan 2026

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the role of the imposter syndrome in defining the leadership identity, the decisions taken, and the perception of effectiveness of senior leaders of UK business schools. Although the syndrome of the imposter has had considerable literature coverage in terms of research as an issue faced by young academics, little research seems to exist that explores this syndrome at the senior levels of leadership. It is evident that the study employs a qualitative research methodology that is rooted in the principles of the interpretivist paradigm. This study involved conducting in-depth interviews with senior academic leaders, such as Programme Directors, Departmental Heads, or Associate or Deputy Deans, in various business schools in the UK. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed for the analysis of data to understand the interpretation of IMPS among the senior academic leaders. Findings suggest that the presence of imposter syndrome is widespread among senior university leaders, sustained by performance-managed systems of governance, metric-based accountability, and uncertain leadership power. Perceptions of imposter syndrome shape leadership behaviours in complicated ways, including positively influencing self-monitoring, emotional labour, risk-aversion behaviours, and reflexive behaviours that also cultivate self-reflection, self-consciousness, or self-humility. Psychological safe work environments with collegiate support were shown to soften the experience of leadership self-doubt among university leaders with imposter syndrome. This research moves the literature on leadership forward by shifting the understanding of the imposter syndrome from a personal psychological issue to a structurally created phenomenon. This research offers new empirical evidence on senior academic leadership in the context of UK business schools, emphasizing the importance of dealing with the institutional factors that enable the issue of self-doubt in leadership.*

KEYWORDS: Imposter syndrome; Academic leadership; UK business schools; Leadership identity; Psychological safety.



INTRODUCTION

Higher education leadership is experiencing a significant amount of shift in the last two decades with the influence of more intensive competition, marketization, performance measurement, and an expanding role of management. In UK business schools, senior academic executives are trapped between the forces of scholarly reputation, management accountability, and external gaze. More often, the role of Programme Director, Department Head, or Associate or Deputy Dean is characterized by the need for strategic decision-making, public presence, and emotional labour in the context of more uncertainty.

Despite their formal positional power, high-level academic administrators often operate in their leadership contexts with uncertain power, legitimacy challenges, and continuous scrutiny. This situation inevitably prompts important questions about leader self-perception as well as their experience of their positional power. One area that seems to increasingly emerge with significance in regard to such questions of self-perception with respect to leadership power is that of imposter syndrome. This is apparently characterized by the “perception that one is an imposter or fraud and that ‘one does not actually deserve’ or will be shown to be undeserving of one’s accomplishments.” While earlier research into this area has involved high-achieving women in higher education or young professionals, current scholarship increasingly indicates that it is more widespread with respect to gender, career stages, and contexts.

Related to academia, the phenomenon of imposter syndrome has widely explored in the context of doctoral students, young professors, or other marginalised communities. At the same time, it is noticed that there is still a large research gap related to how senior professors in institutions of higher learning, such as business schools, experience feelings of being imposters despite the emphasis on performance ratings, reputation rankings, or management rationales. Being senior does not necessarily mean having self-assurance or psychological security could mean missing the true experience of senior professors.

This paper contends that the issue of imposter syndrome among senior academic leaders should not be viewed through the lens of individual psychological issues. Instead, it is deeply ingrained in an institutional setting that molds the ways of constructing the legitimacy of academic leadership. In the area of business schools, given the fact that the authority of the leader is dependent on scholarly credentials, management skills, as well as recognition, it is likely for the leader to face challenges related to the legitimacy of authority.

This research aims to shed some light on the relationship between self-doubt, leadership identity, decision-making, and relationship-building by investigating the phenomenon of the imposter syndrome through the biographies of senior leaders of UK business schools. This research should help to provide a more humanistic understanding of academic leadership by moving away from the deficit model interpretation of senior leaders’ work by revealing some of the structural factors that are responsible for the phenomenon of the imposter syndrome among senior leaders in academia.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Imposter syndrome is widely studied, especially within a professional setting that is characterized by high levels of accomplishment, strict normative standards, and annual performance measurement. Despite such considerable attention, it remains inadequately explored in the context of senior academic leadership, more so in UK business schools. This literature review critically synthesises established, verified, or peer-reviewed academic literature through four interrelated themes: imposter syndrome as an organisational phenomenon, leadership identity and legitimation, academic leadership in business schools, and organisational and cultural issues in UK higher education. It provides a firm theoretical foundation for this study by establishing overt research gaps.

Imposter Syndrome: An Organisational & Leadership Phenomenon

Imposter syndrome is widely regarded as the internal experience of self-doubt and fear of being found fraudulent despite evidence of competence and success (Clance, 1985). Current literature has transcended individualized psychological understandings of the situation, with a shift in understanding imposter syndrome as a social production (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Bravata et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that the experience of an imposter is perpetuated by their surroundings that provide practices of comparison through challenges of ambiguous definitions of what constitutes success (Cokley et al., 2017; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017).

Within literature on leadership, feelings of imposter syndrome are linked to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, low self-efficacy, or risk avoidance (Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; Legassie et al., 2008; Parkman, 2016). Leaders with feelings of imposter syndrome could become over-preparers or avoid seeking to be noticed or could hesitate to assert their authority, behaviors that influence their effectiveness as leaders subtly (Vergauwe et al., 2015). Notably, some authors point out that seeing imposter syndrome as an individual issue could mean that structural or cultural factors contributing to self-doubt among effective professionals remain hidden (Bravata et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, despite these accomplishments, the bulk of the empirical research is concerned with students, young academics, or marginalised professional cohorts. Senior administrators tend to be presumptively viewed as impervious to feelings of imposter syndrome on account of their position of power, a premise that is left largely unchecked.

Leadership Identity, Legitimacy, & Self

A useful framework in understanding the potential for the presence of an individual with imposter syndrome in senior roles is that of leadership identity. According to DeRue & Ashford (2010) & Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri & Day (2014), leadership identity is the internalized view of oneself as a leader that is developed through social interactions, recognition, and conformity with dominant leadership patterns. It is stressed that it is a dynamic process that is constantly negotiated, as it is not a fixed characteristic.

A crucial aspect of this dynamic is legitimacy. This is because leaders obtain legitimacy not only through formal authority but also through various forms of symbolic credibility, expertise, or recognition by their peers (Suchman, 1995; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In situations where formal authority is ambiguous or challenged, identity-strained states can often be a reality for leaders, even at senior levels. It is suggested that, empirically, leaders whose self-conceptions



do not match external demands are more likely to suffer identity strain or self-doubt (Petriglieri, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Research on the relationship between feelings of imposter syndrome and leadership identity suggests that feelings of being an imposter could potentially impair the leader's feelings of legitimacy, their self-monitoring, or their practices of authority (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Feenstra et al., 2020). Such processes are still vastly uncharted in academic discussions of leadership, especially in senior roles, where power is formally established but symbolically fragile.

Academic Management in UK Business Schools

Academic leadership in UK business schools is a distinctive context that could potentially heighten feelings of being an imposter. Business schools are Caught between Being a School of Management of a university, integrating academic principles with more market-led priorities like rankings, accreditation, employability, and financial indicators (Pettigrew, Cornuel, & Hommel, 2014; Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007). Academic leaders are faced with a complex role of maintaining credibility as scholars, managers, and public representation.

There is evidence in literature of role ambiguity, identity tension, and emotional labor for senior leaders in higher education (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; Floyd & Dimmock, 2011; Bryman, 2016). Transitions into senior roles tend to be informal and without development support or clear indicators of success (Bolden et al., 2012). When the role becomes more managerial in practice, leaders tend to feel uncertain about their ability and authority, especially in times of threatened academic identity.

Within the UK context, the presence of very performative environments, such as the Research Excellence Framework, Teaching Excellence Framework, and global rankings, is thought to affect business school deans significantly (Morrell & Learmonth, 2015). While such environments tend to heighten visibility, they could potentially heighten feelings of being an imposter even among senior leaders. However, fairly little scholarly research with psychological or identity-based foundations seems to have probed into the subjective experience of senior leaders.

Organisational Conditions

There are certain organisational conditions, Culture is an important antecedent of the prevalence and experience of imposter syndrome. Research has found that rivalrous, opaque, and idealized depictions of confident leadership contribute to self-doubt, while collegial, reflexive, or developmentally centred culture decreases the experience of imposter syndrome (Cokley et al., 2017; Feenstra et al., 2020). Within work contexts, the presence of imposter syndrome is maintained by unclear indicators of success and the perception of continuous evaluation.

In the context of higher education in the UK, structural factors such as the appointment of leaders for a limited term, collegiate forms of governance that are characterized by unclear boundaries of authority, or the use of performance-based accountability can potentially foster feelings of being an imposter for senior leaders (Deem et al., 2007; Bolden et al., 2012). At the personal or individual levels, senior leaders feel isolated with limited support or opportunities for mentoring, potentially contributing to identity vulnerabilities (Floyd, 2016).



At the same time, new evidence is emerging that some senior leaders do undertake adaptive forms of identity work, using feelings of being an imposter as a sign of responsibility, ethics, or reflection, rather than incompetence (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015; Hutchins et al., 2018). These forms of personal coping or sensemaking remain poorly theorized in current research on leadership.

Gaps Identified

There appear to be several related gaps that originate from this literature. Imposter syndrome study is still inadequately linked to theoretical concepts of identity, leadership, and legitimacy, especially for senior levels of leadership that encompass formal power balanced with feelings of vulnerability. Currently, there is a significant research gap concerning senior university leaders in business schools in the UK. There is little research about the lived experiences of Programme Directors, Departmental Leaders, or Deans. The preponderant use of quantitative surveys hinders understanding of lived experience, sensemaking, or identity work. There is little qualitative research about the interpretation and management of feelings of being an imposter among senior executives. Despite the recent focus on leadership wellbeing in higher education, a gap exists in regarded guidance for identifying and dealing with imposter syndrome among senior leaders without perpetuating stigma or individualization of blame. In this way, the current study locates the imposter syndrome with regard to being a relationship-based and organisational issue, situated in senior academic leadership roles. This research contributes to the literature on leadership by highlighting identity, legitimacy, or emotional labour as important considerations for understanding leadership practices in UK business schools.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the role of the imposter syndrome in defining leadership identity, decision-making, and practice among senior university leaders of business schools in the UK. A qualitative research methodology is more suited to the research since it considers the subjective matters of personal experience, identity, and sensemaking that cannot be evaluated by quantitative research methodologies alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Being shaped by social construction, emotion, and context, leadership identity and instances of the imposter syndrome make an interpretive research methodology appropriate for this research.

Research Philosophy and Research Approach

It is backed by an interpretivism philosophy that perceives social reality as being shaped by the meanings, interpretations, and interactions of individuals (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Interpretivism is considered one of the widely adopted philosophies in leadership studies and higher education inquiry, especially where the objective of study is to examine the interpretation of complex roles, power relations, or emotional experiences by actors involved (Bryman, 2016; Floyd, 2016). This philosophical approach allows for an investigation of the interpretation of feelings of being an imposter by senior academic leaders in UK business schools in a unique context.



This study is grounded in an inductive research methodology, which facilitates the development of a theory through empirical evidence instead of hypothesis testing (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, since empirical literature on senior academic leaders who experience imposter syndrome remains scarce, the development of a theoretical framework that consolidates leadership identity, legitimacy, and emotional labor is facilitated by an inductive methodology. Although this research is accompanied by the theoretical framework of literature on leadership identity with imposter syndrome, it is receptive to unexpected findings that are empirically grounded (Charmaz, 2014).

Research Design

The research study uses a qualitative research design that is based on semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are very effective for studying delicate issues concerning identity since they are structured enough to enable comparison between the data collected from the research subjects (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Moreover, these interviews are effectively utilized in seeing the approaches used by research subjects or leaders to make sense of authority, legitimacy, or self-doubt (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Knights & Clarke, 2014).

This emphasis on senior academic leaders is clearly a deliberate attempt to fill a substantial research gap. This is because the individuals who took part in the research held formal leadership roles such as Programme Directors, Departmental Heads, or Associate/Deputy Deans. These positions entailed a combination of strategic, academic, and high levels of visibility, making such roles more relevant for studying the role of impostor syndrome with formal power (Bolden et al., 2009; Floyd & Dimmock, 2011).

Sampling Strategy and Participants

A purposive sampling approach was used to select participants with direct and sustained personal experience of senior academic leadership in UK business schools. Purposive sampling is valid in qualitative research that seeks depth of understanding, as distinct from representativeness (Patton, 2015). Participation criteria were that a participant must have held a senior academic leadership position for at least two years, with direct experience of the challenges of senior leadership, judgment pressures, and intra-institutional politics.

Participants were invited through professional contacts, leadership group discussions, and direct invitations. Effort was made to ensure that there was some variability in terms of type of institution, leadership position, gender, and faculty area, which is reflective of the diversity of business schools in the UK. Data gathering went on until theoretical saturation was achieved, that is, until no new themes were gathered from additional interviews (Guest, Bunce, Johnson, 2006). This enhanced the analytical transferability of the findings, as the final study consisted of leaders of Russell group, post-1992 institutions, as well as specialist institutions (Lincoln, Guba, 1985).

Data Collection

Data was gathered via online; Microsoft Teams interviews that maintained confidentiality. These interviews were between 60-90 minutes long to enable the participant to engage their thinking about their own leadership experience, feelings, and context. These interviews were grounded in existing literature on the topic of imposter syndrome, identity, and academic



leadership, including areas such as feelings of legitimacy, leadership visibility, decision-making with scrutiny, emotional labour, or finding ways of dealing with it (Clance, 1985; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Floyd, 2016). Due to the sensitive nature of the research, it was important to design the interviews in such a way that rapport building was achieved, which is important for research areas such as vulnerability and self-doubt in positions of authority (Edmondson, 2019). All the interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis, as specified by Braun & Clarke (2021). Reflexive thematic analysis is a suitable means of identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data, considering the active role that the researcher plays in data interpretation. Data analysis consisted of several stages including familiarity, initial coding, development of themes, inspection, and refinement. Initial coding involved an inductive process, keeping closely to the language of the research participants to ensure that meaning is retained without presuming theoretical concepts too early (Charmaz, 2014). These initial codes were then grouped into themes that encompass shared observations about either the experiences of imposters, identity or leadership, or legitimacy, behaviour, or context. Analysis through Constant Comparison permitted assessment for similarities and differences between leadership positions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis software for qualitative data analysis was employed to enable coding for systematic analysis that is also transparent and auditable. Reflexivity and theoretical sensibilities, especially on the intersections of imposter syndrome with power, authority, or identity in senior roles, were facilitated by keeping analytic memos (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

Trustworthiness & Rigour

Concerning the issue of the study's credibility and truthfulness, it is important to state that it was approached using the established qualitative principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It should be noted that it is important to improve the study's credibility by employing prolonged engagement with the research data, paying heed to the voices of the research respondents, as well as employing quotations for purposes of reporting.

Confirmability was dealt with through reflexive journaling, allowing for an interrogation of research assumptions and positionality (Finlay, 2002). Transferability was dealt with by ensuring that roles, context, and work environments of the research participants were clearly captured, allowing readers to determine the application of the research findings to their own context (Bryman, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was secured from the research ethics committee before engaging in data gathering. Participants were given information about the research objectives, methods, as well as the ethical considerations in place, before seeking their consent to participate. Anonymity was achieved by using names for participant identity protection, while identifying information was stripped from transcripts for publications. In view of the reputational risk involved with prestigious roles in higher education, care was taken to not only safeguard the data in line with data protection regulations, but also to ensure that research participants were able to withdraw



without any repercussions at any point in time (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

Methodological Limitations

A qualitative research design allows for a deeper understanding of the senior leadership group's situation, but it is not intended for statistical generality. It is analytically, not probabilistically, generalisable. Also, the data, being self-report data, could be fraught with retrospection or impression management, especially for the sensitive experience of being an imposter (Alvesson, 2011). These issues are managed through research interviewing, reflection, and triangulation. This approach offers a robust and contextually informed framework for analysing the issue of imposter syndrome as an intrinsic feature of senior university leadership in UK business schools.

FINDINGS

This paper explores the empirical results of an analysis of qualitative interviews of senior academic leaders from UK business schools on the theme of imposter syndrome. It shows the extent to which research into imposter syndrome can reveal through qualitative analysis what it means to live with imposter syndrome feelings in a formal leadership role, and what these feelings mean for leadership identity, practice, and effectiveness. Four key themes were found: leadership legitimacy, hidden emotional labour, behavioural outcomes for leadership practice, and the role of the organization in impacting or alleviating imposter syndrome feelings. Examples from the data are used to support points raised.

Contested Leadership: Challenges for Legitimacy

One of the motifs evident in the data is the questions that were constantly raised about the legitimacy of leadership, even with some of the most accomplished senior academics. There was a perception of a gap between their formal position and their subjective feelings of deserving to be in that position. Despite being Head of Department or Associate Deans, a number of leaders questioned whether they actually "belonged" in their position.

"On paper, it looks like I'm a very successful leader in academia. But internally, there is always a voice that says, 'You've just been lucky. At some point, they'll realise you're not actually good enough for this position,'"

This type of feelings of illegitimacy were often initiated by external assessment processes such as accreditation exercises, research audits, or critical committee sessions. Some of the research participants related feelings of being an imposter to the performative culture that pervades the context of business schools.

"Leadership is very public here. You're being judged by peers who are just as accomplished as you are. That type of comparison breeds this sense that you're an impostor trying to be in charge."

Notably, the presence of imposter syndrome was not alleviated by advancing years. Those who took longer to ascend to leadership roles showed that despite their ability to effectively contribute to their organization, some private doubts were likely to remain.



Emotional Labour and Concealment for Senior Roles

A second theme was the emotional work of masking feelings of being an impostor. There was a consistent impression of having to appear confident, decisive, and in control despite feelings of uncertainty. This was especially the case for senior staff, who not only had to worry about their own performance but also about the emotional tone of their respective departments.

“You must always remain calm and command authority. You do not get to say, ‘I do not know’ or ‘I am struggling.’ You maintain that in your heart without expressing it outwardly.”

This was emotionally taxing work that often-involved feelings of loneliness. Some of the research participants talked about the role of a leader as one that is “lonely,” in that being vulnerable was seen as a risk. Emotional regulation work to sustain a plausible leader identity is consistent with other scholarship about emotional labour in academic management.

A Deputy Dean observed:

“I do a lot of work for other people, reassuring them, while struggling with questions of my own. This emotional labour is invisible work, but it is very tiring.”

It appears that suffering from the imposter syndrome is not only a personal psychological issue but is also sustained by an organisational culture of inhibiting emotional expression among senior executives.

Effects on Leadership Behaviour & Decision Making

Imposter syndrome was found to influence leadership behaviour in a subtle but pervasive manner. Participants showed increased tendencies of self-monitoring, over-preparation, and hesitancy to assert their authority, especially in uncertain or politically charged contexts. These tendencies sometimes culminated in risk-averse decision-making or a drift towards seeking consensus.

“I tend to double-check everything and seek more approval than I probably need. Part of that is diligence, but part of it is fear of being exposed as making the wrong call.” He is always seeking additional input for his decisions: “Even with very small things, like what restaurant to go to”

Some researchers mentioned issues related to alienating or delegating power cautiously, out of concerns about being viewed as incompetent or lacking legitimacy. In contrast, some researchers mentioned that feelings of being an impostor could provide a motivational boost with regards to preparation or listening to other people’s views.

A Head of School observed:

“It is self-doubt that forces me to listen more attentively. I’m very aware of not wanting to dominate conversations. It’s made me a more inclusive leader in that respect.”

These results suggest that the presence of imposter syndrome is far from detrimental to leadership effectiveness. Rather, it influences leader practice in complex ways that both limit power but also foster reflexivity.



Organisational Conditions Shaping Imposter Experiences

The final theme acknowledges the importance of the context of organisational settings that either exacerbated or tempered the earlier-mentioned feelings of imposter syndrome. It is important to note that the research participants were keen to indicate that feelings of imposter syndrome were more organisational issues than personal phenomena. Issues such as competitiveness, opaque promotion systems, or male-dominated leadership ideals were often mentioned as factors. One participant stated:

“The system is always conveying the message that you are only as good as your last grant or your last ranking. Such a situation makes it very difficult not to feel like a fraud sometimes.”

On the other hand, supportive leadership environments were found to moderate the experience of imposter syndrome. Those who worked in an environment with a culture of mentoring, open decision-making, and colleague support reported more confidence and less self-doubt.

“If there is openness at the top, if people can own uncertainty and learn together, it normalizes uncertainty. It makes a huge difference.”

These observations indicate that the phenomenon of the imposter syndrome is widely ingrained in the organisational culture of firms, as opposed to it being related to individual resilience and confidence.

In aggregate, it is shown here that the presence of the imposter syndrome is widespread and significant to senior roles in UK business schools. It is revealed to be evident through challenges of legitimacy, the concealment of emotional labour, and adaptive behaviours, which influence how such senior executives position their power, make decisions, or relate with other players. While one could accept that imposter feelings can limit leadership confidence, it is also possible that it can cultivate reflexivity or relationship awareness in certain contexts. More significantly, it is found that the presence of organisational structures and culture is decisive in either perpetuating or diminishing the presence of the imposter syndrome.

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to explore the role of the imposter syndrome in determining the identity, behaviour, and effectiveness of senior leads in UK business schools. Analysis of the research reveals that the phenomenon of the imposter syndrome is not exceptional or marginal in senior leadership roles but is a pervasive issue that interacts with the university cultures and governance systems. This discussion explores the research data in the context of previous literature related to this topic.

Firstly, the pervasive questioning of leadership legitimacy uncovered by this study confirms, and pushes on, established scholarship on imposter syndrome, which defines it through the lens of intellectual fraudulent feelings despite objective accomplishment (Clance & Imes, 1978; Harvey, 1981). Although a good deal of scholarship on this topic concerns itself with young university professors or other marginalised social groupings, it is evident from these current findings that feelings of imposter syndrome continue to resonate deeply at senior levels of executive leadership. This finding strikes at the heart of presumptions embedded in university



culture about the psychological effects of experience, seniority, or institutional position. Instead, it confirms more recent scholarship on this topic that suggests that performance regimes are what sustain feelings of imposter syndrome, rather than overcoming with time (Feenstra et al., 2020; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017).

These results also strongly support leadership legitimacy literature. Leaders' uncertainty about their legitimacy is consistent with relational-constructionist concepts of leadership that propose that leadership legitimacy is never fully established by formal appointment (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014). Within the context of business schools, where leaders are customarily selected from among their peers who possess very high credentials, leadership legitimacy is very tenuous. The evidence from the research suggests that leader imposter syndrome is amplified by the fact that leaders must lead peers with whom they are no longer direct equals but are held accountable by their peers through their performance. This is consistent with the observations that academic leadership is characterized by "authority without power" that is situationally vulnerable (Bolden et al., 2012).

A second major contribution is regarding emotional labour. Noticing the extent to which senior academic leaders undertake the effort of emotional labour to hide feelings of self-doubt while radiating feelings of confidence is important. This is consistent with Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labour, including subsequent work on senior academic leadership, pointing out that leaders must not only manage their own feelings but those of their followers as well (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004; Blackmore, 2017). This imperative for senior leaders to appear emotionally invulnerable fuels the problem of silence about feelings of being an imposter, contributing to feelings of isolation and psychological distress, which explains why feelings of being an imposter remain despite senior leadership experience.

Behavioural implications developed from the findings add to the more established understandings of effective leadership. Imposter syndrome was found to affect decision-making styles, conflict behaviours, and power expressions. Firstly, consistent with established literature, high self-doubt correlated with over-preparation, risk-aversion, and seeking consensus in decision-making (Kets de Vries, 2005; Vergauwe et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the current study refines more deficit-based understandings of imposter syndrome by demonstrating it can cultivate thoughtful practice, with more modesty and empathetic sensibilities. This is consistent with more recent understandings of leadership that position vulnerabilities and reflexivity skills as potentially significant positive leadership qualities that can be developed in more psychologically safe contexts (Edmondson, 2019; Tourish, 2020). Hence, a more complex interpretation of imposter syndrome is that it is more of a social marker that is situationally dependent.

Crucially, the research confirms the importance of seeing imposter syndrome as an institutional phenomenon rather than an individual psychological characteristic. This is clear in that participants strongly attributed their own imposter syndrome to structural aspects of UK business schools, such as audit culture, metricized performance management, opaque promotion practices, or masculine forms of leadership. This evidence is of course consistent with critical work on neoliberal governance in HE, which shows that enhanced accountability and competitiveness can generate insecurity, self-monitoring, and identity disunity for university administrators themselves (Shore & Wright, 2015; Morrish, 2019). These results clearly indicate a need for a shift in understanding imposter syndrome from an individual



psychological issue to an institutional-cultural one, as posited by other authors (Breeze, 2018; Feenstra et al., 2020).

The current study: In respect of leadership theory, it contributes to discussions about distributed and relationship-based forms of leadership by evidencing the incongruity between philosophical approaches to shared leadership and personal accountability. Even as shared approaches to leadership become more fashionable in the higher education literature, individual leaders continue to face personal risk in respect of reputation. Furthermore, this incongruity fuels feelings of being an imposter and impacts on the ability of leaders to act. Closing this gap is more complex than individual techniques for dealing with it.

In practice, the implications of the results are that interventions seeking to manage feelings of imposter syndrome among senior university leaders must be multitiered. While it is important that there be some form of support group or formalized mentoring relationship to attempt to alleviate feelings of isolation, interventions must extend into promotion practices that provide clarity, dialogical approaches to leadership and communication, or the formal recognition of emotional labor (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

In conclusion, it seems that this research places imposter syndrome squarely in the context of being both structurally produced and relationally sustained in the senior leadership of UK business schools. It challenges individualist interpretations by indicating the ways in which feelings of being an imposter influence behaviour in both constraining and enabling ways.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed at investigating the role of the imposter syndrome in defining the identity, behaviour, and effectiveness of senior academic leaders of UK business schools in terms of their leadership identity, behaviour, and effectiveness. It has been found that the phenomenon of the imposter syndrome is not something that is personal or temporary in respect of the psychological state of individual senior leaders that can be alleviated through promotion to senior positions. It is something that is deeply embedded in the culture of higher education.

Analysis revealed that senior leaders in academia tend to experience feelings of self-doubt regarding their legitimacy, authority, and leadership competence despite their formal appointment as leaders. These feelings of looming imposter syndrome are further fueled by performance-oriented institutional settings characterized by metrickation, comparisons, and uncertain leadership authority. In this respect, leadership is subject to consistent assessment and challenges, making legitimacy uncertain. These findings, therefore, contradict the presupposition that seniority or experience shields leaders from psychological susceptibilities.

Notably, the research evidence suggests that imposter syndrome is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon that impacts leadership practice in several contradictory ways. While it is true that individual self-doubt is linked with emotional overload, risk aversion, and conflict avoidance that could potentially impinge on the development of strategic leadership, it is also the case that feelings of being an imposter can contribute to reflexivity, a sense of personal fallibility, and attentiveness that could positively influence inclusive forms of leadership. This ambivalence serves to commend a shift away from pathologizing conceptions of the imposter syndrome and towards a more complex approach.



From a theoretical point of view, the contribution of this study is found in its placing of the issue of imposter syndrome into frameworks of thought that explore leadership legitimacy and identity with regard to relations and institutions. It adds to current knowledge with regard to imposter syndrome by indicating that the issue does not end in mid-career appointments but is maintained through conditions that are institutionally embedded in governance structures of higher education institutions.

In practice, what is implied by these results is that dealing with the issue of imposter syndrome in senior academic leaders is both a personal as well as an institutional issue. While it is important for issues of isolation to be dealt with through such means as mentoring, coaching, or networking, it is important for such issues to be dealt with through structural means that work on improving issues of transparency, emotional labour, and the distribution of responsibility for leadership.

Imposter syndrome is an important yet incorrectly dismissed area of senior academic leadership practice among UK business schools. It is crucial to address the structural factors of this syndrome to ensure both the psychological integrity of leaders and the development of more confident, moral, and effective forms of leadership practice for complex and pressured academic institutions.

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