

# NAVIGATING NEW TRAJECTORY FOR INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE: UNDERSTANDING IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON AMONG NONTRADITIONAL INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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*ABSTRACT:* In the globalized higher education landscape, international students are integral to the academic community. International students often face unique challenges, including language and cultural barriers, adjusting to American classroom expectations, and feelings of isolation. This qualitative study explores impostor feelings among nontraditional international doctoral students at an R1: Doctoral University, by probing how these experiences intersect with their pursuit of higher education. Six students shared their experiences and coping strategies, revealing a pattern of self-doubt fueled by internalized stereotypes and societal expectations. Participants developed coping mechanisms, including self-care practices and seeking support from family, academic, and social networks. This study highlights the need for inclusive excellence initiatives that address the specific needs of nontraditional international doctoral students, underscoring the importance of fostering a more inclusive environment for diverse student populations.

*Keywords:* impostor phenomenon, imposter syndrome, nontraditional students, international students, doctoral education, R1: Doctoral University

## Conceptual Framework

The concept of inclusive excellence in higher education centers on the strategic integration of diversity, equity, and inclusiveness within the fundamental operations of academic institutions (Sanger & Gleason, 2020). This model aims to cultivate environments where every student, particularly those hailing from diverse backgrounds, can flourish. A critical focus is placed on the success and well-being of international students, who often face unique challenges in their academic journeys. Creating an environment that transitions from mere demographic diversity to genuine intercultural pluralism is not solely the responsibility of administrators. Students do not compartmentalize their experiences based on settings like the classroom, laboratory, studio, athletic field, residential building, or dining hall. Faculty members, in collaboration with students, play a crucial role in cultivating a community that utilizes the unique identities and perspectives of each student. A pertinent aspect of this framework is the impostor phenomenon, which describes a psychic struggle where students, irrespective of their accomplishments, grapple with pervasive self-doubt and a fear of being exposed as frauds—a condition first articulated by Clance and Imes in 1978. Within research universities, where the quest for knowledge and innovative inquiry is prioritized, creating an inclusive environment becomes indispensable for meeting these academic objectives.

Inclusive excellence places emphasis on both the representation of diverse student bodies and the establishment of structural supports and policies that enable full engagement of these populations. Researchers in higher education have identified several critical elements vital for facilitating an inclusive excellence framework, particularly as it pertains to international students. These elements include fostering diverse learning environments, implementing support systems, enhancing cultural competence, and creating ample opportunities for student engagement (Berry, 1997; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado et al., 2012).

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This study operates within a conceptual framework that amalgamates inclusive excellence principles with the exploration of how the impostor phenomenon affects nontraditional international doctoral students at an R1: Doctoral University. This integrative approach aims to enhance understanding of how these interconnected factors shape the academic experiences and achievements of this distinct student demographic, thereby addressing both psychological and systemic issues impacting their success.

## **Literature Review**

### **Inclusive Excellence in Higher Education**

Inclusive excellence represents a foundational concept vital for improving the academic lives of nontraditional international doctoral students in research-intensive institutions. As academic entities evolve to embrace diversity, it becomes critical to identify and address the unique experiences and obstacles these students encounter in order to nurture equitable educational environments.

Historically, movements aimed at promoting diversity in educational systems from K-12 through higher education have witnessed transformative shifts. Initiatives such as the ethnic studies movement laid groundwork for curricula that honor and reflect diverse cultural narratives (Banks, 1996). As higher education institutions adjusted their recruitment, admission, and hiring practices to enhance access for students of color, it became increasingly clear that such strategies were insufficient to dismantle the disparities experienced once students entered academic environments. Research illustrates that despite increasing enrollment rates for minority groups, including international students, many still face distinct challenges adversely impacting academic performance and social integration (Williams et al., 2005).

Contemporary studies continue to illuminate the persistent achievement gaps feigned by minority students in higher education, with evidence suggesting lower academic performance, delayed progress, and heightened dropout rates compared to their white counterparts (Bauman et al., 2005). The situation is exacerbated for nontraditional international doctoral students, for whom the impostor phenomenon—a psychological construct characterized by self-doubt regarding accomplishments and fears of exposure as frauds—poses additional hurdles (Clance & Imes, 1978; Kheang, 2023). This condition disproportionately impacts individuals from diverse backgrounds, as cultural and contextual factors may amplify feelings of isolation and inadequacy, significantly hindering their academic performance.

### **Understanding the Impostor Phenomenon in Higher Education**

The term “impostor phenomenon,” often referred to as “imposter syndrome,” was introduced by Clance and Imes in 1978 as a manifestation of self-doubt many individuals experience, reflecting a pervasive feeling that success is attributable to external circumstances rather than personal merit (Acker, 1997; Bell, 1990; Clance & Imes, 1978; Zorn, 2005). Research indicates that international students, especially those from non-Western cultures, may be particularly vulnerable to impostor feelings due to hurdles such as cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, and issues related to integration, which further deepen their sense of alienation in academic environments (Kheang, 2018, 2023).

Clance and Imes (1978) highlighted four critical behaviors that often complicate the experience of impostor phenomenon among women in particular. The first behavior pertains to an over-reliance on hard work and diligence, where individuals tie their sense of achievement to

external validation and performance metrics. This creates a fleeting sense of accomplishment accompanied by the fear that perceiving oneself as competent may lead to eventual failure. The second behavior encompasses a persistent sense of phoniness, as felt by many participants who feared revealing their true opinions or identities in academic settings, adhering instead to expected norms. Additionally, behaviors related to employing charm and perceptiveness serve to engender approval from authority figures, suggesting a psychological struggle that pits self-worth against external expectations.

The impostor phenomenon can hinder individuals from thriving, especially in high-pressure environments typical of academia (Cowman & Ferrari, 2002). Clance's (1985) extensive work on the subject led her to develop the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale as a diagnostic measure. Through this scale, she identified several common symptoms experienced by those grappling with impostor syndrome, including anxiety, stress, feelings of inadequacy, and discomfort with accolades for achievements, among others.

The intertwining of the principles of inclusive excellence with the concerns surrounding the impostor phenomenon serves to provide a more enriched understanding of how these constructs collectively shape the experiences of nontraditional international doctoral students in research universities. Recognizing impostor phenomenon as a significant barrier to academic performance and the emotional well-being of students underscores the necessity for universities to implement intentional strategies aimed at addressing these challenges while fostering an environment that promotes diversity and equity. This integrated model may enable higher education institutions to better support nontraditional doctoral students, empowering them to navigate their academic journeys with confidence and resilience.

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative case study specifically investigates the impostor phenomenon's impact on nontraditional doctoral students at an R1: Doctoral University in the southern part of the United States. The research endeavors to (1) ascertain the nature of students' experiences concerning the impostor phenomenon and (2) identify coping strategies that could foster inclusive excellence within academic settings. The study involves six participants who took part in in-depth interviews conducted via Zoom during the fall semester of 2022.

Each in-depth interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was recorded, followed by transcription for analysis. The researcher used thematic analysis method to examine the data. The interview framework is divided into three segments targeting specific research inquiries. The first section contained six demographic questions alongside explorations of participants' challenges and experiences with impostor syndrome. The second part incorporated queries assessing the impacts of the phenomenon on personal, academic, and professional dimensions. The third segment solicited insights regarding support systems and coping strategies that students employed throughout their doctoral journeys.

### **Findings**

The participants in this research comprised a diverse cohort of six international doctoral students hailing from countries across India and the Middle East, all enlisted in STEM programs. Each participant's identity is anonymized, and their names are pseudonyms. Their ages ranged from 30 to 39 years, denoting a nontraditional student demographic actively engaged in various stages of their academic journeys. Maliwan, at 31, represented the youngest participant, currently in her third semester, while Mohammed, 39 years old, had impressively

spent seven years navigating his program. Sirirath and Komar, also 31, were advancing through their fourth year and three-and-a-half years of study, respectively. Rahu, at 37, was in his second year, and Sanyoo, the youngest male participant at 30, had completed two years in his doctoral program. This diverse representation reflects a wealth of experiences and perspectives that shape their academic endeavors (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Summary of Participants' Profiles*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Year/Semester of Study in the Doctoral Program</b>	<b>Major</b>
Maliwan	31	Female	3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	STEM
Sirirath	31	Male	4 <sup>th</sup> year	STEM
Komar	31	Male	3 and half years	STEM
Mohammed	39	Male	7 years	STEM
Rahu	37	Male	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	STEM
Sanyoo	30	Male	2 years	STEM

**Challenges Faced by Nontraditional International Doctoral Students**

Most participants in this study entered academia as international students to fulfill life goals surrounding job satisfaction, personal growth, and professional exploration. Such aspirations, while significant, were met with numerous challenges encountered along the way, impacting their journeys as nontraditional international doctoral students at an R1: Doctoral University. Participants spoke candidly about the personal and academic hurdles that contributed to their experiences with the impostor phenomenon.

*Personal Challenges*

Nontraditional international doctoral students face myriad personal and academic challenges that greatly shape their experiences and impede efforts to foster inclusive excellence within universities. As these individuals embark on their academic journeys, they often engage in significant opportunity costs, emphasizing sacrifices made in pursuit of doctorate degrees. Participants frequently reflected on the trade-offs involved, especially the loss of time spent with family and friends, as illustrated by one participant's poignant articulation of this dilemma: "It is an opportunity cost for both... graduate school experience is built around the convention, community of students" (Sanyoo). The resulting sense of loss often leads to feelings of isolation and disconnect from peers, as Rahu stated: "My nontraditional status prevents me from spending time with them because I have more responsibilities."

Compounding these personal sacrifices is the upheaval caused by relocation, which introduces stressors disrupting established social networks and community connections. Adjusting to a new environment can prove disorienting and isolating for many nontraditional students. One participant noted a significant drop in social activities, sharing, "We reduce church attendance" following a move, which underscores how relocation can truncate personal engagement (Sanyoo). Homesickness and separation from loved ones constitute significant emotional burdens, as expressed by Maliwan: "What really sucks about this whole experience is that I had

to spend a tremendous amount of time away.” This sense of emotional uprooting exacerbates feelings of disconnection, complicating efforts to form supportive relationships within the academic context.

Additionally, experiences of prejudice and microaggression leave participants dealing with identity threats, resulting in emotional and psychological fragility. This aspect of their journeys was highlighted by Mohammed, who expressed disappointment regarding perceived cultural biases from his faculty advisor. He stated, “I feel disappointed, isolated, and frustrated.” The emotional toll of such encounters intertwines deeply with the pervasive issue of impostor phenomenon, further complicating academic experiences of these students.

### ***Academic Challenges***

Beyond personal hurdles, nontraditional students encounter a broad spectrum of academic obstacles that amplify feelings of inadequacy and reluctance. Common themes emerged regarding a significant lack of support from advisors. Several participants articulated a feeling of disconnection during their advising relationships that led to heightened anxiety about making academic progress. Mohammed lamented, “My advisor is totally indifferent after the first semester... I did not receive any help from him.” This absence of guidance left him grappling with feelings of helplessness, uncertain about meeting the rigorous demands of his program.

Moreover, gaps in knowledge and experience within their respective fields presented significant hurdles. Participants also reported feelings of falling behind their peers, leading to pervasive self-doubt and insecurities regarding their academic abilities. “I feel like I’m much behind others,” Maliwan stated, exemplifying the fear of inadequacy that often plagues nontraditional doctoral students. The complexity of academic reading and writing further complicates the path to success. For instance, Komar said, “I thought I was a good writer before... but I realized that my writing was good from the persuasive style, which is not the solid writing used in academic publication.” Such feelings of inadequacy can hinder these nontraditional international doctoral students’ ability to pursue academic expectations fully.

The interplay of personal and academic challenges facing nontraditional international doctoral students emphasizes the need for higher education institutions to critically assess their support systems. The unique environment of graduate studies can foster deep self-doubt, as highlighted by Rahu, who observed, “The PhD system is designed to make people feel stupid... unless you're one of the relatively few who has a naturally very self-confident personality.” Addressing systemic issues at play is essential for fostering an academic atmosphere that supports diversity of experiences and promotes the success of all students.

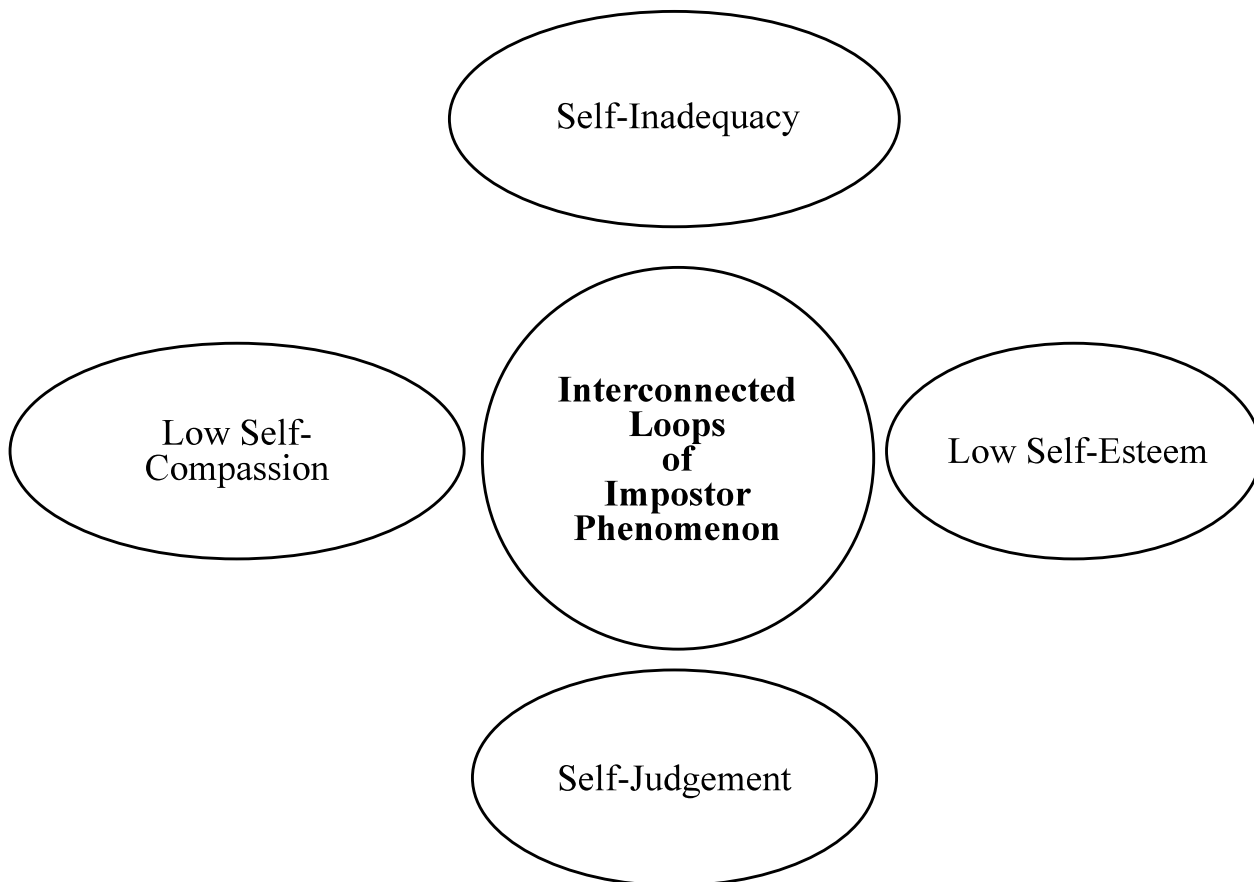
Additionally, the research findings reveal that all six participants perceived themselves as impostors, tying their internal struggles to a combination of four interconnected loops representing the impostor phenomenon: self-inadequacy, low self-esteem, self-judgment, and low self-compassion (see Figure 1).

### ***Impostor Loop 1: Self-Inadequacy***

The self-inadequacy loop prominently emerged among participants, often related to past traumatic experiences or preconceived limitations placed upon them. Mohammed articulated this sentiment: “I felt the impostor syndrome a lot more in the past... It was a constant feeling of inadequacy and competition with others.” Some participants identified perfectionism as a contributing factor to their feelings of self-inadequacy, while others felt immense pressure to

**Figure 1**

*Interconnected Loops of Impostor Phenomenon: Internal Challenges*



meet expectations from advisors or peers. Rahu echoed these sentiments: “I still feel like I am not good enough... it’s hard to overcome the idea that you are not qualified.”

Sanyoo illustrated this loop further, sharing how his interactions with faculty heightened feelings of inadequacy: “When I’m around faculty... I just feel a little bit out of my league.” Komar articulated a similar struggle, capturing the exhausting nature of balancing perceptions of “what is required of him” against self-acceptance. Maliwan summed up the perpetual feeling of inadequacy succinctly: “No matter what it takes, I would always feel like I’m inadequate.”

***Impostor Loop 2: Low Self-Esteem***

Low self-esteem was identified as a significant contributor to the impostor experiences among participants. Many recounted childhood expectations shaping their self-worth, which continued to inform their challenges with feelings of inadequacy. Sirirath described familial pressures to excel, stating, “My childhood... my parents compared me with other people.” This constant comparison fueled Mohammed’s need for validation from others, placing him in a constant state of insecurity: “It was like needing to feel the best—to be recognized as the best.”

Several participants, including Maliwan, indicated a tendency to idolize mentors, amplifying feelings of inferiority: “He’s so knowledgeable... if I don’t understand something he said, I should figure it out on my own.” During orientation, Rahu’s self-doubt intensified after comments made by faculty, leading him to question his capabilities: “Am I able to achieve that or to compete?” Komar echoed these feelings of competition, emphasizing a hesitancy to seek help owing to a desire to prove his worth.

### ***Impostor Loop 3: Self-Judgment***

The self-judgment loop involved critical evaluations of personal capabilities, further exacerbating negative self-perceptions. Participants repeatedly described this cycle as worsening their low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. Maliwan admitted to “always underestimating” her achievements, despite recognition from her advisor: “It’s just me that I feel like I should have achieved something better.”

Sanyoo labeled himself as “a mean coach,” where self-criticism served as a motivator, whereas Mohammed lamented an inability to enjoy personal accomplishments due to relentless self-judgment. “I need to work on myself to rid the feeling of underestimating the significance of my work,” he stated, illustrating the burden this loop placed on self-esteem.

Rahu noted that pressure to publish intensified his self-judgment, fostering feelings of inadequacy in the face of peers: “I feel insufficient... Everyone is doing it so quickly. Why am I not doing that?” Meanwhile, Komar highlighted that critical self-judgment prompted feelings of hopelessness, remarking: “I will never meet the expectations—I’m slow on writing and slow on publications.”

### ***Impostor Loop 4: Low Self-Compassion***

Low self-compassion manifested in participants’ tendencies to engage in self-blame and apathy when confronting challenges. Komar revealed that he often blamed himself, stating: “I sometimes tend to blame myself, like why am I not able to get such a simple thing to work.” Maliwan expressed frustration with herself, asserting, “I always feel like if I can’t do this thing the first time that it’s like, oh, gosh! Like I screwed up massively.”

Sanyoo remarked on disengagement from celebrating accomplishments: “I stopped celebrating my success,” symbolizing how impostor phenomenon can sap enthusiasm for personal milestones. Rahu disclosed that he neglected self-care during difficult times, isolating himself to avoid burdening others: “I don’t want to feel like I’m burdening anybody else.”

These intertwined loops created a cycle that participants found challenging to break free from, ultimately resulting in compounded feelings of self-doubt and unworthiness. The insights provided by the participants illuminate the complex nature of the impostor phenomenon while highlighting the necessity for targeted interventions to dismantle these cycles.

### **Coping Strategies**

The research findings indicate that participants employed two primary types of coping strategies to manage their impostor feelings: self-help strategies and external assistance.

## ***Self-help***

Self-help strategies emerged as predominant among participants and included critical self-reflection, self-care practices, and self-motivation. Self-reflection included introspective exercises that allowed participants to unpack the nuances of their impostor experiences, engaging in evaluations of “what,” “when,” “why,” and “how.” For instance, Maliwan noted the importance of understanding how various values influenced her doctoral experience to define her life purpose. Sirirath underscored the significance of recognizing the origins of his feelings, connecting his impostor experiences to academic struggles of the past.

Self-care practices incorporated physical activities or hobbies, with participants like Rahu and Sanyoo identifying exercise as a crucial outlet for managing stress. Additionally, self-compassion and mindfulness featured prominently, with Mohammed indicating, “Practicing self-awareness helped me to focus on improving my self-inadequacy rather than beating myself up.” Self-motivation was evidenced through positive self-talk and affirmations, with Komar deploying phrases like “You can do it” to counter negative thoughts surfacing during moments of self-doubt.

## ***External Help***

The pursuit of external sources of assistance emerged as vital among participants, encompassing professional help through therapy and medication. Mohammed described relying on medication, stating, “I’ve been on a pretty heavy dose of antidepressants, and that’s really the only thing that has been successful for me.” Support from advisors, mentors, families, life partners, and friends proved crucial, as Sanyoo emphasized that conversations with his partner helped him navigate challenging times. Participants like Maliwan highlighted the importance of shared experiences among peers: “Talking to peers who understand my situation has been vital.” Nonetheless, several participants faced challenges in locating adequate support within their academic communities, underscoring a pressing need for improved mental health resources. Ultimately, participants navigated their impostor experiences through a combination of self-help strategies and external support, reflecting a holistic approach to combat academic pressures.

## **Conclusion**

This exploratory study sought to investigate how the impostor phenomenon impacts nontraditional international doctoral students within the context of inclusive excellence in higher education. Findings reveal that interconnected loops of self-inadequacy, low self-esteem, self-judgment, and low self-compassion create a complex web of challenges experienced by these students. Despite notable academic achievements, participants grappled with feelings of self-doubt, fears of exposure, and a sense of non-belonging, all of which significantly influenced their educational experiences and emotional welfare. The diverse backgrounds and unique challenges illuminated by participants underscore the necessity for higher education institutions, particularly research doctoral universities, to address these issues with a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of international students.

## **Implications**

The implications derived from this study extend to institutions actively striving for inclusive excellence, emphasizing the importance of fostering supportive environments specifically catered to the needs of nontraditional international doctoral students. The intrinsic loops of the



impostor phenomenon illustrate how systemic factors interwoven within academic cultures can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and isolation among these individuals. Therefore, universities must prioritize the cultivation of structures that promote mental well-being, academic growth, and community connectedness. This pursuit includes enhancing mentorship and advising practices, fostering peer networks, and adopting culturally responsive policies to facilitate open dialogue regarding impostor feelings. Such strategic measures can empower students, enabling them to surmount self-doubt and engage wholeheartedly in their academic endeavors, fostering a sense of belonging and affirmation within the academic community.

### Recommendations for Further Research

Further research could explore various avenues to build on the findings established within this study. Longitudinal studies could yield insights into how the impostor phenomenon evolved over time for nontraditional international doctoral students, especially during transitions throughout their academic careers. Additionally, comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts could illuminate how differing cultural attitudes towards success and failure shape the experience of the impostor phenomenon and inform the strategies students employ to navigate these feelings. Assessing the effectiveness of specific interventions tailored at mitigating the impostor phenomenon, such as mentorship programs, mental health initiatives, and peer support networks would also be invaluable. Lastly, broadening the participant pool to encapsulate a wider array of disciplines and institutions could enhance the generalizability of findings and further enrich practices aimed at promoting inclusive excellence in higher education.

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