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RESEARCH PAPER

Mapping the Impostor Phenomenon in Academia: A Scoping Review of Antecedents, Experiences, and Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Impostor feelings are widely discussed in higher education, but evidence on academic staff is scattered. The present study mapped research on the impostor phenomenon (IP) among university academics, asking which institutional factors are associated with IP, how it varies by career stage, and what it is linked to at work. Following Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) guidance and PRISMA-ScR, the present study searched PubMed, Scopus, ERIC and Wiley's full-text database, plus web and backward citation searching. Eighty-six studies were included. Most came from the United States (58) and were published from 2022 onward (66); half were qualitative (43), and nearly all quantitative studies were cross-sectional. IP was associated with competitive, brilliance-oriented field cultures, heavy evaluation, weak mentoring and identity-based exclusion. IP was generally higher among early-career and untenured academics than among senior staff, and was consistently associated with exhaustion, burnout and lower job satisfaction. No study measured objective productivity, promotion or turnover, and the five intervention studies targeted individuals or small groups. The evidence ties IP to working conditions that universities control, although the designs cannot show cause. Universities have grounds to invest in mentoring, transparent evaluation and support at role transitions, and longitudinal, multi-country studies and institution-level trials are needed.

KEYWORDS Impostor Phenomenon, Impostor Syndrome, Academic Staff, Faculty, Early-Career Researchers, Burnout, Higher Education, Scoping Review

Introduction

Universities depend on the confidence, health and retention of their academic staff, yet academic work is organised around almost constant judgement. Manuscripts are sent out for peer review, grant proposals compete for funding, students evaluate teaching, and probation, promotion and tenure decisions are often driven by metrics. In such settings, many successful academics harbour feelings of fraudulence and fear being found out as less competent than others believe them to be. Clance and Imes (1978) first described these feelings as the impostor phenomenon (IP). Reported prevalence ranges from 9% to 82%, and across a wide range of professions IP has been linked to burnout, lower job satisfaction and poorer job performance (Bravata et al., 2020; Gullifor et al., 2024).

Impostorism is a particular issue for universities. As staff progress from doctoral and postdoctoral positions to lectureships, permanent posts and management roles, each stage brings new fears of being found out. Unlike students, academics are employees of the university and are subject to its rules and procedures, including those governing promotion and support. Universities commonly respond to impostor feelings by sending

the affected person to a confidence-building workshop. However, a growing body of critical work argues that impostor feelings among academics are not only a psychological matter but may also signal wider problems, from audit culture and precarious employment to exclusion (Breeze, 2018; Feenstra et al., 2020; Knights & Clarke, 2014). If that argument holds, the usual response may miss much of the cause. Universities therefore need evidence about their staff specifically, and at present it is scattered and hard to use.

Existing reviews do not fill this gap. Gullifor et al. (2024) mapped IP in workplace research generally, and Bravata et al. (2020) reviewed prevalence and correlates across populations. More recent reviews have focused on post-secondary students (Ménard & Chittle, 2023), doctoral students (Wang & Li, 2023), medical trainees and physicians (Chua et al., 2025) and surgeons (Jin et al., 2025), and an umbrella review has re-examined the concept as a whole (Gisselbaek et al., 2026). Yang et al. (2024) reviewed higher education but pooled students with staff. The evidence on academic staff, spread across education, psychology, management and health-professions journals, has therefore not been mapped on its own, nor organised around questions on which institutions can act.

The present study addresses that gap in two ways. To the best of the authors' knowledge, it is the first synthesis restricted to academic staff, and it organises the evidence around institutional antecedents, career stage and workplace consequences rather than around prevalence alone. It also pairs the synthesis with a bibliometric analysis of the wider literature, which shows where research on academics sits within a field dominated by student and clinical samples.

The objective of this scoping review was to map the empirical evidence on IP among university academics. Because the studies mix surveys, interviews and small intervention designs, a scoping review was better suited than a meta-analysis. Three research questions guided the review. RQ1 asked which institutional, organisational and field-level factors are associated with IP among university academics. RQ2 asked how the prevalence and experience of IP differ across academic career stages, ranks and role transitions. RQ3 asked which workplace outcomes have been linked to IP among academics and which interventions have been tested.

The review is significant for both practice and research. For universities, it identifies which features of evaluation, support and inclusion are linked to impostor feelings among staff and at which career points support is most needed. That gives a basis for policy that goes beyond confidence training. For researchers, it shows where evidence is thin, especially outside the United States, in longitudinal designs and in objective outcomes such as productivity and turnover, and so sets out priorities for future studies. The next section reviews the concept and the theories that shaped the research questions; the present study then describes the methods, reports the findings for each question, and discusses their implications.

Literature Review

Clance and Imes (1978) coined the term impostor phenomenon after working with more than 150 high-achieving women, among them university faculty and students, who believed they were not truly intelligent and had fooled others into thinking otherwise. People with strong impostor feelings attribute success to luck, timing or other people's misjudgement, discount praise, and fear being exposed as frauds. IP is not a clinical diagnosis (Mak et al., 2019). It is usually treated as a dimensional experience that

varies between people and over time, and it often co-occurs with depression and anxiety (Bravata et al., 2020).

How IP is measured shapes what is known about it. Four self-report instruments dominate: the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS; Clance, 1985), the Harvey Impostor Scale, the Perceived Fraudulence Scale and the Leary Impostorism Scale (Mak et al., 2019). The 20-item CIPS is the most widely used, and its total score is commonly banded into few, moderate, frequent and intense impostor feelings. A systematic review of available scales found that the existing psychometric data were incomplete and that the dimensionality of the construct was unresolved (Mak et al., 2019). Leary et al. (2000) also found that some impostor behaviour is self-presentational: high scorers were especially likely to lower their stated expectations when their responses were made public. These differences in measurement help to explain the very large differences between reported prevalence rates (Bravata et al., 2020).

Alongside these measurement problems runs a conceptual critique. Framing 'impostor syndrome' as an individual problem has been criticised in the context of audit and performance measurement, environments in which academic identities become precarious and fragile (Knights & Clarke, 2014). Recent studies of academic labour have begun to describe impostorism in more collective, emotional terms, bringing into view the effects of the neoliberal university and its measurement-driven cultures (Breeze, 2018). Feenstra et al. (2020) argue that research has located both the roots of IP and its remedies in the individual, overlooking how environments elicit impostor feelings, especially among members of under-represented groups. On this view, feeling like an impostor may be a fair reading of an insecure or exclusionary workplace.

If environment matters, then what about the components of that environment? Disciplines believe to a greater or lesser extent that success is based on innate ability and thus confer few PhDs on women and African Americans (Leslie et al., 2015). Within academia a focus on genius has been linked to increased feelings of impostorism (Muradoglu et al., 2022) as well as to more competitive masculine environments (Vial et al., 2022). From the perspective of tokenism theory, in underrepresented groups, members are highly visible, assessed as group representatives and pressurized into proving their competence (Kanter, 1977). And yet, from another angle, helping newcomers to recognize their own competence can be the function of mentors, sponsors and networks of peers (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017).

Further consideration needs to be given to the career stage of the individual. In the academic environment, feelings of impostorism appear to be heightened at key career transitions. For example, postdoctoral researchers (Chakraverty, 2020a), newly appointed tenure track staff (Mulholland et al., 2023; Sims & Cassidy, 2019) and those newly appointed to senior management roles (Gander, 2024) all report feelings of impostorism. The question remains as to whether it is their rank or their relatively new status in a post that precipitates these feelings. For example, perhaps the unttenured researcher feels a greater sense of evaluation intensity than his or her more established colleagues, perhaps he or she is simply struggling to come to terms with his or her new role.

The job demands–resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) has been used to study various workplace factors. Energy and strain at work are influenced by work demands and by work resources such as operational and financial support and employees' autonomy. Within the academic faculty, feelings of being an impostor (IP)

might make up for an additional demand. The IP has been found to be correlated with avoidant coping and with decreased energy but with increased emotional exhaustion (Hutchins et al., 2018). However, the applicability of these findings to other jobs in academia as well as the impact of IP on, for example, turnover rates or on productive work, is not yet clear. Hence, the environment, the career stage and the related consequences of IP were the three main questions for this review.

Material and Methods

The present study followed the JBI methodology for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020) and reports the review against the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018). A scoping design was chosen because the aim was to map the extent and nature of the evidence, not to estimate pooled effects. The protocol was not registered in advance. The review questions, eligibility criteria and charting fields were nonetheless defined a priori, before screening began.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility was defined with the Population–Concept–Context (PCC) framework (Table 1). In brief, a study had to report empirical data on IP among academic staff of a university or other degree-awarding institution. The present study counted postdoctoral researchers and clinician-educators with faculty appointments as academic staff, because both hold formal academic posts. Mixed samples were eligible when academic staff formed an identifiable part of the sample, even if their data were not analysed separately; findings from these studies are interpreted with caution in the synthesis.

Table 1
Eligibility criteria using the Population–Concept–Context framework

Element	Included	Excluded
Population	Academic staff of universities and other degree-awarding institutions: faculty of any rank or contract type, postdoctoral researchers, early-career researchers, clinician-educators with faculty appointments and academic leaders. Mixed samples were included when academic staff were an identifiable part of the sample, whether or not their data were analysed separately.	Samples of students only (undergraduate, graduate or doctoral) and residents or trainees without faculty data. Practising professionals with no academic appointment, librarians, and professional or support staff.
Concept	The impostor phenomenon, impostor syndrome, impostorism or impostor feelings. These had to be measured with a scale or reported as an explicit finding of a qualitative study.	Studies where IP appeared only in the introduction or discussion. Constructs given a similar label but not defined as IP.
Context	Any country and any discipline, studying IP in an academic workplace.	—
Sources	Peer-reviewed empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, intervention or autoethnographic), in English, published from 1978 onward.	Reviews, commentaries, editorials, programme descriptions without data, theses, conference abstracts and book chapters.

Information sources and search

The present study searched four databases: PubMed, Scopus, ERIC and Wiley's full-text database (Table 2). The bibliographic searches combined two blocks of terms, one for the impostor phenomenon (*impostor*, *imposter*) and one for academic staff (*faculty*, *academic**, *professor**, *early career*, *postdoc**, *lecturer**). Because Wiley's database searches full text and not just abstracts, it was used to find studies that discuss IP among academics in the body of a paper but not in its abstract. The present study ran one natural-language

query for each review question, then searched the web for further eligible studies and checked the reference lists of included studies and of earlier reviews (backward citation searching). Web of Science and APA PsycINFO were not searched, a limitation addressed in the Discussion.

Table 2
Database search strategies

Database (platform)	Search string and fields	Records
PubMed	(impostor[tiab] OR imposter[tiab]) AND (faculty[tiab] OR academic*[tiab] OR professor*[tiab] OR "early career"[tiab] OR postdoc*[tiab] OR lecturer*[tiab])	227
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY((impostor OR imposter) AND (faculty OR academic *OR professor* OR "early career" OR postdoc *OR lecturer*))	369
ERIC	(impostor OR imposter) AND (faculty OR academic *OR professor* OR "early career" OR postdoc *OR lecturer*), searched in title, abstract and descriptors	175
Wiley full-text database	Three natural-language queries of the full text, one per review question: RQ1, "institutional, organisational and field-level factors associated with the impostor phenomenon among university faculty and academic staff"; RQ2, "impostor phenomenon across academic career stages, ranks and role transitions, including postdoctoral researchers, lecturers and professors"; RQ3, "workplace outcomes of and interventions for the impostor phenomenon among university faculty and academic staff"	32
Other methods	Targeted web searches; backward citation searching of included studies and of earlier reviews	21

Note. All searches were limited to records published from 1978 onward. Language and document-type limits were applied at screening, not in the search strings.

Study selection and data charting

Records from the four databases were combined and de-duplicated, first by DOI and then by normalised title. One reviewer screened titles and abstracts against the eligibility criteria and then read the full record of every potentially eligible study, noting the main reason for each exclusion. A second author checked every included study and its charted data against the source, and disagreements were resolved by discussion. Records found through web and citation searching went through the same steps. The flow of records is shown in Figure 1 (Results). The present study charted each study with a form built around the three review questions. The fields were authors and year; country; discipline and setting; population and career stage; design; sample size; IP measure; the review domains the study informed; and key findings. Career stage was charted as each study's authors defined it (for example, trainee, postdoctoral researcher, untenured or tenure-track, tenured or senior, leader), because studies used different cut-offs. Each study was coded to one or more of four domains: institutional antecedents (RQ1), career-stage differences (RQ2), workplace consequences (RQ3) and interventions or supports (RQ3). Data were charted from full texts where available and otherwise from abstracts and publisher records. In line with scoping-review guidance, the present study did not formally appraise study quality, but it charted design features that affect how far findings can be trusted, such as sampling method, response rate and whether data were cross-sectional.

Synthesis and bibliometric analysis

The present study first summarised study characteristics with counts and an evidence map that cross-tabulates review domains by study design. Findings were then

synthesised narratively within each domain. For RQ1, the present study grouped findings into themes. For RQ2, the present study compared groups as the study authors reported them and noted whether a difference held after adjustment where models were reported. For RQ3, the present study reported the direction and, where available, the size of each association. Because almost all quantitative studies were cross-sectional, the present study describes relationships as associations and reserve causal wording for the one randomised trial. Finally, the present study combined quantitative and qualitative findings in a descriptive model linking antecedents, career-stage exposure and consequences (Figure 5). The model summarises reported associations; it is not a tested causal model.

To place the included studies in the wider literature, the present study analysed the 544 records exported from Scopus (369) and ERIC (175). These records include the many student and trainee studies that the review excluded. The present study used bibliometrix (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) to describe annual and country output and VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010) to map keyword co-occurrence. The map was built from all keywords (author keywords and database index terms) using full counting, with a minimum threshold of five occurrences per keyword. Keyword variants were not merged before mapping. This analysis was descriptive and played no part in deciding eligibility.

Results and Discussion

Selection and characteristics of the included studies

The database searches returned 803 records (PubMed 227, Scopus 369, ERIC 175, Wiley 32). After 158 duplicates were removed, 645 titles and abstracts were screened and 114 full records were assessed, of which 73 met the eligibility criteria. The most common reasons for exclusion at the full-record stage were that IP was mentioned but not studied (16) and that the sample did not include academic staff (14). Web and citation searching identified 21 further reports. Three could not be retrieved and 5 of the remaining 18 were excluded, so 13 studies were added. One of these (Mori et al., 2026) was found by web searching during revision of this manuscript. In total, 86 studies were included.

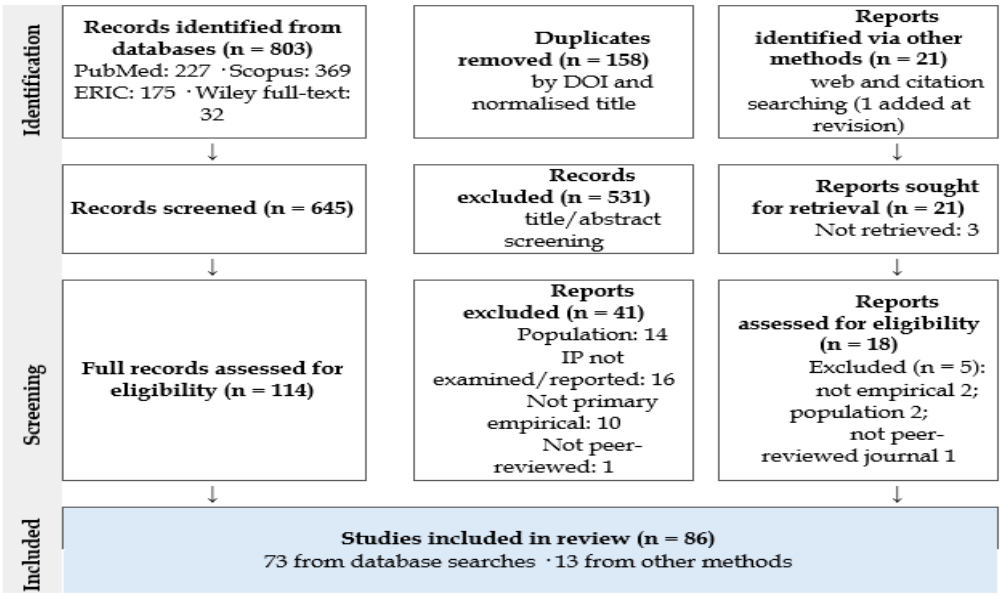


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR flow diagram of the search and selection process

The included evidence is recent, concentrated in the United States, and mostly qualitative (Table 3). Only three studies appeared before 2015, whereas 66 of the 86 were published from 2022 onward (Figure 2). Fifty-eight studies came from the United States and nine from the United Kingdom; Canada and Australia contributed two each, and nine other countries one each. Thirty-two studies were set in health-professions faculties and 14 in STEM. Forty-three were qualitative, and 16 of these were autoethnographies, self-studies or testimonios. Among studies that used a scale, the CIPS, in its full or short form, was the most common (24 studies). Most quantitative studies were single-wave, cross-sectional surveys of convenience samples, and where response rates were reported, they were often below 40%.

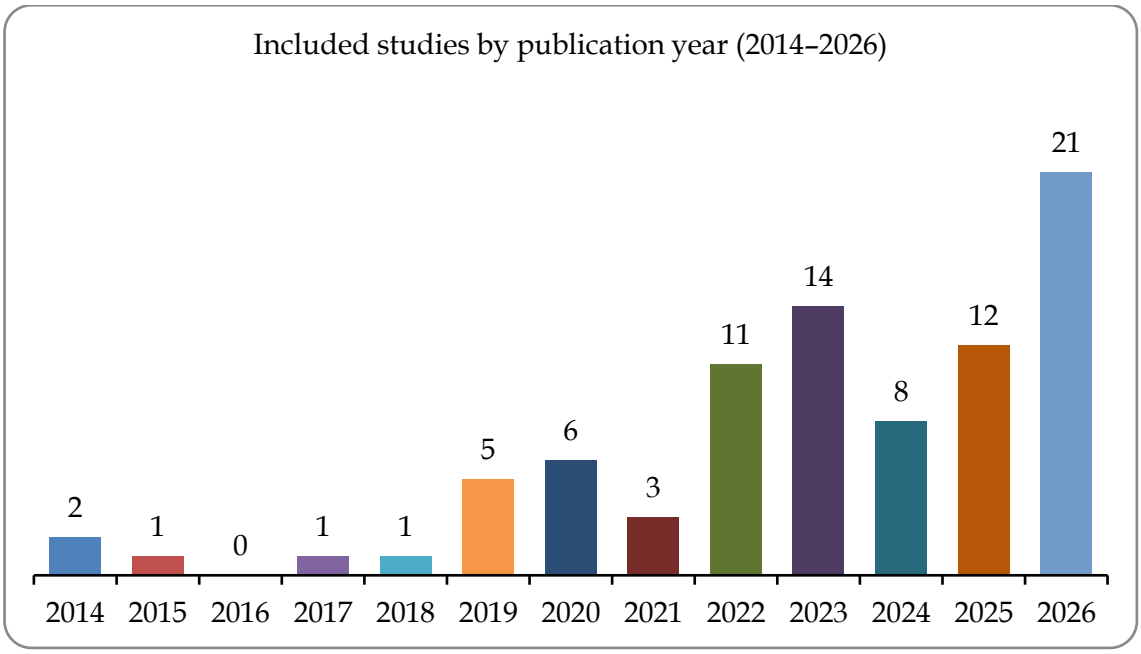


Figure 2. Included studies by year of publication (n = 86). One study from 1994 is not shown; 2026 is a partial year.

Table 3
Characteristics of the 86 included studies

Characteristic	Category	Studies (n)
Country	United States (incl. one US–Canada sample)	58
	United Kingdom	9
	Canada; Australia (two each)	4
	Brazil, India, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Tanzania, UAE (one each)	9
	International sample	1
	Not stated in record	5
Discipline	Health professions (medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, veterinary)	32
	STEM (incl. engineering and agricultural sciences)	14
	Multidisciplinary or other (education, social sciences, business, law)	40
Population	Faculty and academic leaders only	65
	Postdocs or early-career researchers only	4
	Mixed with trainees or students	17
Design	Quantitative (cross-sectional, correlational or diary)	31
	Qualitative (incl. 16 autoethnographies, self-studies or testimonios)	43
	Mixed methods	7
	Intervention (1 RCT, 4 pre–post or pilot)	5

Review domain addressed	Institutional antecedents (RQ1)	49
	Career stage (RQ2)	47
	Workplace consequences (RQ3)	30
	Interventions or supports (RQ3)	13

Note. Studies could address more than one review domain, so domain counts sum to more than 86.

The evidence is uneven across the review questions (Figure 3). Findings on institutional antecedents come mainly from qualitative studies (32 of 49), whereas findings on workplace consequences come mainly from quantitative surveys (19 of 30). Interventions and supports are the thinnest area, with five intervention studies and eight qualitative accounts and no quantitative evaluation of an institution-level support.

	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed methods	Intervention	Studies
Institutional antecedents (RQ1)	10	32	6	1	49
Career stage (RQ2)	19	22	6	0	47
Workplace consequences (RQ3)	19	7	2	2	30
Interventions and supports	0	8	0	5	13

Figure 3. Evidence map of the included studies by review question and study design (n = 86). Set against the wider literature, this evidence base is small. Across the 544 Scopus and ERIC records, output was negligible before 2017 and then rose steeply, reaching about 90 records in 2026. The United States produced the most records, followed by the United Kingdom. The keyword map (Figure 4) has five clusters: clinical and prevalence terms (blue), stress and academic performance (yellow), higher education and professional identity (green), equity and well-being (red), and burnout in clinical training (purple). Students and medical trainees form the largest nodes, and no node names faculty or academic staff. The equity cluster, which links racism, microaggression and diversity, anticipates the exclusion theme reported under RQ1.

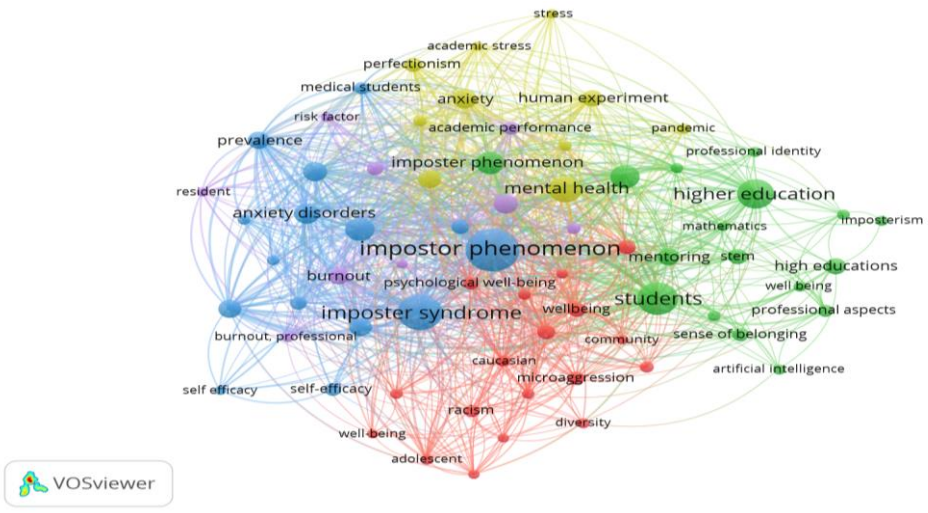


Figure 4. Keyword co-occurrence map of the 544 Scopus and ERIC records (VOSviewer). Node size shows how often a keyword occurs, lines show co-occurrence, and colours mark clusters.

Institutional factors associated with IP (RQ1)

Forty-nine studies linked IP to features of the academic environment. The present study grouped their findings into six themes, which run from field-level culture down to the position of individual staff.

The first theme is field culture. In the largest included study, a survey of more than 4,000 US academics in over 80 fields, impostor feelings were stronger in fields seen as requiring raw brilliance. The difference was largest for women, and especially for women from under-represented racial and ethnic groups (Muradoglu et al., 2022). Vial et al. (2022) suggest one mechanism. Academics who saw their field as prizing brilliance also tended to see it as having a "masculinity-contest" culture, and that culture was associated with stronger impostor feelings; in follow-up experiments, describing a workplace as valuing brilliance led people to expect such a culture. A daily diary study of 197 junior STEM researchers points to a second pathway. Researchers in competitive work climates more often saw feedback as inaccurate or dishonest, and on days when they did, their uncertainty about their own ability rose (Meinderts et al., 2024). Respondents in a medical-education cohort likewise named the "academic rat race" as a contributor (Ogunyemi et al., 2022).

Competition shades into the second theme, evaluation. Qualitative studies often traced impostor feelings to moments of judgement: colleagues or students questioning one's expertise (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Stickl Haugen et al., 2021); peer comparison, faculty evaluation and public recognition (Chakraverty, 2022b); presentations, publications and rejections (Mori et al., 2026); and unexpectedly negative feedback during "academic stretch" (Trimble et al., 2026). Canadian staff and professors described similar causes in open-ended survey responses (Ménard et al., 2023). At the level of the institution, Knights and Clarke (2014) traced insecure, "impostor" identities among UK business-school academics to regimes of audit, accountability and monitoring. Later studies extend this to newer metrics and processes, including social-media visibility used to judge productivity (Guillaume et al., 2019), inconsistent criteria for professorial promotion (Butler et al., 2026) and new assessment duties without institutional rubrics (Patel et al., 2026). Faculty also described graduate school and the tenure process as normalising impostor feelings as simply part of academic life (Vázquez, 2023).

If evaluation was the most common trigger, support was the most common counterweight. Inadequate mentorship and weak professional belonging were independently associated with impostor syndrome among family-medicine faculty (Carvajal et al., 2023), and residency programme directors with less programmatic support reported more IP (Gopal et al., 2023). Qualitative studies point the same way. Institutional autonomy support eased the move into faculty roles (Vaa Stelling et al., 2023), sponsorship helped women surgeons work through leadership-related impostor feelings (Mott et al., 2025), and faculty described mentoring as tempering IP (Espinoza & Garfield, 2023; Hutchins, 2015). Where support was lacking, it was usually institutional support that was missing. Women STEM leaders said their help had come from individuals rather than from training or institutional structures (McCullough, 2020), and new academics described little formal preparation or mentoring (du Toit, 2025; Li et al., 2026). In a survey of 117 female researchers in Kazakhstan, Xembayeva et al. (2026) similarly linked academic readiness to institutional resources such as mentoring and organisational support as well as to psychological factors, including impostor syndrome.

The fourth and largest theme, identity-based exclusion, came mainly from qualitative studies of faculty of colour and women. It covered microaggressions (Chakraverty, 2022c; Myers et al., 2023), racial battle fatigue (Griffin et al., 2014) and discrimination-based exclusion (Carvajal et al., 2023), as well as being "the only one" or lacking a critical mass of peers (Chakraverty, 2020b, 2022a) and tokenism (Tsuchida et al., 2026). Black women faculty in research-intensive social work schools linked impostor feelings to struggles for authenticity (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021), and pretenure women faculty of colour described impostor syndrome as one of the health costs of the tenure track (Martinez et al., 2024). Similar accounts came from Muslim women scholars (Kizil et al., 2025), a Black man in academia (Adams, 2025) and women academic leaders in Tanzania (Maphie, 2026). In a quantitative study, women faculty rated their department's equity climate lower and reported more IP (Renslo et al., 2023). Several authors challenge the framing itself. Women physicians described doubts imposed by discrimination, which LaDonna et al. (2025) call an "intruder paradox", and Gutiérrez and Cole (2025) propose "impostorization" to describe policies and interactions that make women of colour question their competence.

A fifth theme concerned class and boundary positions. Working-class women academics experienced the impostor-syndrome discourse as hiding classed and gendered ideals of who belongs (Rickett & Thompson, 2026). Others felt like impostors because they sat on a boundary: moving from professional services into academic management (Gander, 2024), combining activism with scholarship (Ruiz Cayuela, 2026), working in a young interdisciplinary field such as engineering education (Chakraverty, 2021), or being positioned by career category and contract during industrial action (Taylor & Breeze, 2020). In a duoethnography, women researchers likewise traced impostorism to institutional and cultural structures (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2026).

The sixth theme, institution type, rests on a single study. Brazilian dental faculty in private institutions appeared more susceptible to IP than those in public institutions (da Rocha et al., 2026), but the study did not examine why, and its sample was small (n = 65).

Across the six themes, the same conditions come up repeatedly, and they are features of workplaces more than of personalities. Because most of these studies are qualitative, though, they describe how academics experience those conditions; they do not show how strongly each one is tied to IP.

IP across career stages (RQ2)

The second review question asked who is most affected across the academic career, and 47 studies addressed it. In most studies that compared groups, IP was higher among trainees and early-career academics than among established faculty, and higher among untenured or lower-ranked staff than among tenured or senior staff. These are cross-sectional comparisons between different people, so they show where IP is concentrated, not how it changes over an individual career.

Trainees usually scored higher than established faculty. Residents scored higher than faculty in general surgery (Leach et al., 2019) and academic plastic surgery (Sergesketter et al., 2024; Taritsa et al., 2026), and in obstetrics and gynaecology more experienced physicians scored lower than trainees (Addae-Konadu et al., 2022). Graduate students and postdoctoral researchers reported stronger impostor feelings than faculty, a gap that was larger in brilliance-oriented fields (Muradoglu et al., 2022). Two

studies found no clear gap: pharmacy faculty and students had statistically similar scores (Boyle et al., 2022), and in a medical university in the United Arab Emirates the higher risk lay with students and those aged 20–30 (Dube et al., 2026).

Within faculty, the same gradient appeared by rank and tenure. IP was highest among untenured (Hutchins, 2015) and tenure-track academics (Shreffler et al., 2023). Among urologists it was associated with lower academic rank and with 0–2 years in practice (Jefferson et al., 2024), and among dental faculty it declined with years of teaching (da Rocha et al., 2026). Age, years of teaching and associate-professor rank were associated with IP among nursing faculty (Williams, 2025). All 54 early-career music-education faculty in one study reported at least moderate IP on at least one role scale; the research role produced the strongest feelings, with over 70% scoring in the frequent or intense range (Sims & Cassidy, 2019). One study did not fit this pattern. In academic plastic surgery, rank and years in practice were not associated with IP after adjustment, and gender was the only predictor that remained (Sergesketter et al., 2024).

Qualitative studies add a different perspective: IP was described as returning with each new role rather than fading steadily with seniority. The transitions described span the whole career. They include entry into and exit from doctoral and postdoctoral training (Chakraverty, 2019, 2020a, 2024; Mori et al., 2026); the move from residency or clinical practice into academia, where nurse academics felt "treated like a beginner" (Aley et al., 2026; Hill et al., 2026; Vaa Stelling et al., 2023); the first faculty year and first doctoral supervision (McEntyre et al., 2022; Richards & Fletcher, 2019); early lectureships and the tenure track (Higson-Bliss, 2023; Mulholland et al., 2023; Stojanović et al., 2026; Wilkinson, 2020); teaching a new field (Lane & Mountford-Brown, 2025); and academic leadership, programme direction and professorial promotion (Butler et al., 2026; DelPrete, 2025; Gopal et al., 2023; Maphie, 2026; Mott et al., 2025). Evidence on leaders fits this picture. Programme directors with less time in post reported more IP (Gopal et al., 2023), and among clinician-educators, impostor syndrome was one factor that derailed movement towards full participation in educator communities (McMains et al., 2024). The main point of exposure, then, seems to be a new role, whatever a person's seniority.

Workplace correlates and tested interventions (RQ3)

The third review question asked what IP is associated with at work, and 30 studies reported workplace correlates or consequences. All quantitative evidence except one diary study was cross-sectional, so the direction of these relationships cannot be established: IP may contribute to strain, strain may heighten IP, or both may share common causes.

Strain was the most frequent correlate. IP was associated with emotional exhaustion among faculty (Hutchins, 2015; Hutchins et al., 2018) and with burnout among academic surgeons (Leach et al., 2019), radiologists (Deshmukh et al., 2022) and nursing faculty (Williams, 2025). Among urologists, each one-point increase in CIPS score was associated with 6% higher odds of burnout (OR 1.06; Jefferson et al., 2024). In early-career samples, IP was associated with burnout (Gondos et al., 2026) and with much higher odds of reporting a mental health condition (OR 13.04; Waters-Harvey et al., 2026). Among 103 early-career academics in Switzerland, it was strongly correlated with lower self-esteem ($r = -.71$) and moderately correlated with lower psychological well-being ($r = -.47$; Mori et al., 2026). IP was also associated with anxiety among obstetrics and gynaecology faculty and trainees (Addae-Konadu et al., 2022) and with

work–family conflict among faculty (Shreffler et al., 2023). Qualitative accounts echo these findings: pretenure women faculty of colour placed impostor syndrome alongside depression, isolation and exhaustion as health costs of the tenure track (Martinez et al., 2024).

Beyond strain, IP was associated with lower job satisfaction among pharmacy faculty (Macias-Moriarity et al., 2023) and nursing faculty (Williams, 2025). Among 155 faculty and staff in Lebanese universities, higher IP was associated with lower well-being and lower self-rated job performance, and in a cross-sectional moderation analysis, perceived organisational support partly weakened the link with satisfaction (Swaidan & Jabbour Al Maalouf, 2025). Hutchins et al. (2018) tested a serial mediation model in which IP was linked to avoidant coping, avoidant coping to emotional exhaustion, and exhaustion to lower job satisfaction. Because all variables were measured at the same time, the model is consistent with this ordering but cannot confirm it. IP was also linked to lower belonging and self-efficacy (Muradoglu et al., 2022) and, in a sample of 1,326 academic women, to a weaker sense of relatedness and a tendency to attribute success to luck (Vaughn et al., 2020).

Fewer studies examined academic work itself. Faculty with more impostor characteristics rated their own teaching lower, although residents' ratings of them did not differ (Husk & Lewis, 2024). Self-assurance about competence went with better teaching evaluations and advising relationships (Brems et al., 1994), and among agricultural faculty, impostorism was associated with lower self-assessed mentoring and teamwork competence (Orsini & Stedman, 2022, 2023). Postdoctoral researchers described not applying for opportunities and procrastinating (Chakraverty, 2020a), counsellor educators linked IP to their research activity (Stickl Haugen et al., 2021), and music-education faculty felt it most strongly in the research role (Sims & Cassidy, 2019). Candidates for professorial promotion described impostor syndrome and modesty as holding them back (Butler et al., 2026). Evidence on retention is thin and mixed. IP was not associated with programme directors' intention to leave (Gopal et al., 2023), but qualitative work linked it to derailed educator careers (McMains et al., 2024) and to burnout during the move into faculty roles (Vaa Stelling et al., 2023). No included study measured objective productivity, promotion outcomes or actual turnover.

Against this evidence of strain, few studies tested ways to reduce IP. Five studies evaluated interventions, all aimed at individuals or small groups. The only randomised trial found that four months of online group coaching for 160 ambulatory faculty physicians reduced impostor syndrome scores relative to a control group (Fainstad et al., 2024). Two small coaching pilots in academic surgery and otolaryngology reported falls in IP, but only 5 and 7 participants, respectively, completed the follow-up measures (Addison et al., 2026; Norouzi et al., 2026). Two workshops improved knowledge or were well received but did not measure change in IP (Deshmukh et al., 2022; Ogunyemi et al., 2022). Eight further studies, nearly all qualitative, described supports that participants found helpful. These included structured mentoring and peer co-mentoring (Aley et al., 2026; Desai & Nguyen, 2025; Espinoza & Garfield, 2023; Li et al., 2026; Trimble et al., 2026), a group leadership-development programme for Black women faculty (Mbilishaka et al., 2023), reflective practice within a postgraduate certificate for new academics (Mulholland et al., 2023) and targeted professional development for new entrepreneurship educators (Lane & Mountford-Brown, 2025). No study evaluated an institution-level change, such as revised evaluation practices, mentoring structures or onboarding. For RQ3, the link between IP and strain is consistent, but there is little

evidence on performance, on retention, or on what helps. Table 4 summarises the main findings and the type of evidence behind each research question.

Table 4
Summary of findings by research question

Research question	Studies (n)	Main findings	Nature of the evidence
RQ1: Institutional factors	49	IP associated with brilliance-oriented and competitive field cultures, frequent evaluation and audit, weak mentoring and institutional support, identity-based exclusion, and boundary positions	Mainly qualitative (32); one large multi-field survey and one survey-plus-experiment study
RQ2: Career stage	47	IP generally higher among trainees, early-career, untenured and lower-ranked academics; described as returning at each new role, including leadership	Cross-sectional group comparisons and qualitative accounts; no longitudinal study
RQ3: Workplace correlates	30	IP associated with emotional exhaustion, burnout, poorer mental health, lower job satisfaction and self-limiting behaviour in teaching and research	Mainly cross-sectional surveys (19); one diary study; no objective outcomes
RQ3: Interventions and supports	13	Online group coaching reduced IP in one RCT; mentoring, peer co-mentoring and group programmes described as helpful	One RCT, four small pilots or workshops, eight qualitative accounts; no institution-level evaluation

Discussion

The present study mapped 86 studies of IP among university academics, and three patterns recur across them. First, IP was associated with the work environment: field cultures that prize brilliance and competition, heavy evaluation and audit, thin support, and exclusion based on race, gender or class. Second, IP was reported most often at points of entry, among trainees, early-career academics, untenured and lower-ranked faculty, and people new to leadership. Third, in cross-sectional studies, IP was consistently associated with exhaustion, burnout and lower job satisfaction, while its links to turnover and performance remain largely untested. Figure 5 summarises these associations. It is a descriptive map of reported findings, and its arrows should not be read as causal paths.

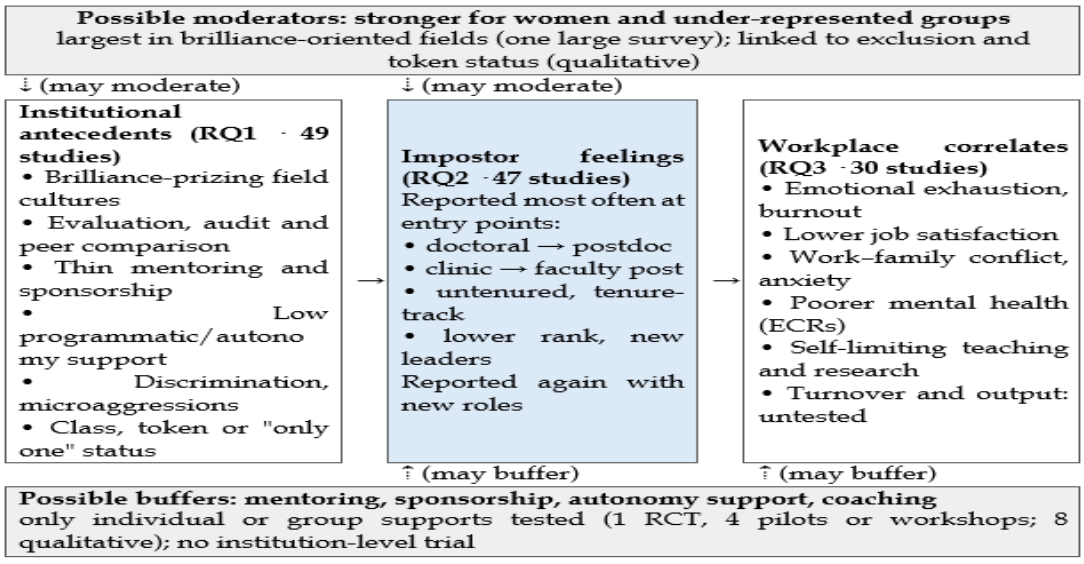


Figure 5. Descriptive model of associations reported in the 86 included studies. Arrows show reported associations, mostly from cross-sectional data, not tested causal

paths. The moderating role of gender and field culture rests mainly on one large survey (Muradoglu et al., 2022) and on qualitative accounts; buffering roles rest on qualitative evidence and one randomised trial of coaching (Fainstad et al., 2024).

These patterns are consistent with critiques of the "syndrome" framing (Breeze, 2018; Feenstra et al., 2020). The strongest designs in the review, a large multi-field survey and a study that combined a survey with experiments (Muradoglu et al., 2022; Vial et al., 2022), both found impostor feelings varying with field culture as well as with the individual. The qualitative studies add that triggers are often social and evaluative: being questioned, compared, judged or publicly recognised. LaDonna et al. (2025) go further, arguing that some of what is labelled IP is doubt imposed by discrimination. In practical terms, when many staff in a department report strong impostor feelings, the department itself may be part of the explanation.

Turning to career stage, IP was reported most often when people took on new roles that were visible and closely evaluated, and qualitative accounts described it recurring at later transitions, such as the move into leadership. This pattern is consistent with the job demands–resources model outlined in the Literature Review (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and with the related conservation-of-resources framework (Hobfoll, 1989): a new role brings fresh demands before resources have been built up, and avoidant coping may deplete those resources further (Hutchins et al., 2018). Because the quantitative comparisons were cross-sectional, each participant was measured only once. The lower IP reported by senior staff may therefore mean that academics learn to cope with impostor feelings, but it may equally mean that those with the strongest impostor feelings leave academia or are not promoted. Findings on rank were also mixed (Sergesketter et al., 2024). It may be time in the current role, rather than seniority itself, that matters most, and a longitudinal study measuring both would help to settle this.

The map also shows where evidence is missing. More than two-thirds of the included studies came from the United States, and more than one-third were set in health-professions faculties. Only seven came from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East combined. Because tenure, permanent employment and research audit work differently from country to country, evidence from one system may not generalise to another, and quantitative research outside North America is particularly scarce. Study design is a second major gap. Apart from a single daily diary study, all of the quantitative studies on consequences were cross-sectional, and many of the qualitative studies were autoethnographies or self-studies written by one author or a small group. These studies give a rich sense of how IP is experienced, but it remains unclear how typical those experiences are. A panel study following academics through role transitions could help determine whether IP precedes burnout or follows it.

A third gap concerns outcomes and measurement. No included study measured the effect of IP on publication output, grant applications and success, promotion or actual turnover. Most quantitative studies used the CIPS, and some of its items may be indicators of perfectionism rather than of impostor feelings (Taritsa et al., 2026). All of the interventions tested so far have targeted individuals or small groups, none has changed mentoring structures, onboarding or evaluation, and fixed-term, adjunct and teaching-focused staff, whose job insecurity is likely to heighten impostor feelings, are largely absent from the evidence base.

The review's main strength is its focus on academic staff, with the evidence arranged around questions that institutions can act on. It also has limitations. The

protocol was not registered in advance. The searches covered PubMed, Scopus, ERIC, one publisher's full-text database, and web and citation searching, but not Web of Science or APA PsycINFO, so some psychology and management studies may have been missed; that one eligible study was identified only during revision confirms that the searches were not exhaustive. One reviewer screened all records, and a second author checked inclusions and charted data but did not screen every record independently. Some studies were charted from abstracts and publisher records because full texts were unavailable. Only English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles were included, so relevant dissertations and book chapters were excluded. Mixed samples that included trainees were retained, which may blur estimates specific to faculty. Finally, keywords were not cleaned before the bibliometric mapping, so spelling variants and database indexing tags appear as separate terms.

Conclusion

This scoping review of 86 studies shows that, among academics, impostor feelings are associated with university working conditions, particularly the ways in which staff are evaluated and supported. They are reported most often at career transitions and are consistently linked to exhaustion, burnout and lower job satisfaction, although current study designs do not allow firm causal conclusions. Universities could therefore treat the impostor phenomenon as a matter of fair and equitable workforce practice as well as of individual psychology, while further research tests whether changes to evaluation, support and mentoring reduce impostor feelings among staff.

Recommendations

There is currently limited evidence to make recommendations regarding actions to address identity performance (IP) at points of academic entry. However, a number of actions are recommended. IP is reported at points of entry to academic institutions, therefore newly appointed postdoctoral researchers, faculty and leaders should receive a structured onboarding process and be given time to undertake mentoring activities and be clear of expectations regarding these activities. These activities including mentoring and sponsorship should be incorporated into the role of all academic positions and accounted for within workload models, rather than left to individuals who voluntarily add these activities to their already full workload. Evaluation criteria for newly appointed academics should be transparent and include space for feedback with resultant developmental actions. Language that implies brilliance in academic work should be removed from criteria used for recruitment and promotion of academic staff. In circumstances where IP is linked to microaggressions, tokenism and other forms of discrimination then actions to address equity rather than trying to build the individual's confidence are required. The preliminary findings from a single randomized controlled trial (Fainstad et al., 2024) support the need for coaching to be evaluated against a comparison group or groups in order to establish whether the coaching has any value. Future research with academics should include a longitudinal study design that follows individuals through academic role transitions in order to establish whether IP leads to or follows from burnout and whether this is more the case in terms of rank or duration of role. Quantitative studies with academics currently tend to be based in the US and focused on health-professions faculties. These should be extended to other regions including Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East and seek to establish a range of objective outcomes including publication, grant writing and success, promotion and turnover for example. In addition to Correlational studies using CIPS subscales and testing for measurement invariance across a number of different variables including

gender identity, cultural background and career stage, there is a need for research that evaluates the institutional-level modifications to mentoring practices, onboarding and evaluation currently proposed for fixed-term, adjunct and teaching-focused academics.

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Data availability: The charting form and the full charting dataset for the 86 included studies are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Protocol registration: The protocol was not prospectively registered.

Ethics approval: Not required; the review analysed published studies only.

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