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Published online: 25 Jul 2022.

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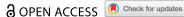
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ABSTRACT

In exploring imposter feelings in early career academics, this article examines the impacts of adopting social constructivist pedagogies. It reveals the significance of reflective practice in a Post-Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice programme (PGCAP), supporting professional development in teaching, learning and assessment for new academics in a UK Higher Education context. A qualitative case study approach enabled researchers to gain insight into participants' experiences; data was collected via semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest that causes for imposter feelings are multi-faceted, encompassing factors including interactions with students, and adjusting to university language, culture and systems. Alongside similar studies internationally, the authors present that employing social constructivist pedagogical tools in a planned programme of professional development for early career academics supports the creation of mutually empowering communities of practice (CoP), so addressing threats to professional identity, providing a horizontal alternative to organisational hierarchical support mechanisms, and enabling the construction of a secure academic identity.

Introduction

Feeling like an imposter is argued to be particularly prevalent within Higher Education (HE) (Parkman 2016). In exploring ways to alleviate the imposter feelings of early career academics, this article highlights the potential significance of reflective practice and social constructivist pedagogies in supporting the creation of mutually empowering communities of practice (CoP). The article discusses research analysing the impact of this approach in a new-lecturer training programme in a UK-based university which aims to address feelings of imposterism as well as equip participants with the knowledge and skills required for teaching in HE.

In examining this issue, the research began with three questions. Firstly, how, and to what extent, do impostor feelings manifest themselves in early career academics? Secondly, what are the impacts of the opportunities for peer-interactions and support resultant from the use of social constructivist pedagogies? Finally, to what extent does the development of a CoP provide a framework to self-regulate imposter feelings?

The article begins by outlining the Imposter Phenomenon (IP) before discussing what might make this particularly prevalent within the current HE context. It then briefly discusses existing research around peer support/CoP and IP. The next section looks at the specific training programme within

which the research took place, and the role of social constructivist pedagogies. From there, it moves on to explain the research design and methodology, before which the findings and discussion respond to the research questions by identifying both the key elements of becoming a lecturer in HE that encourage imposter feelings, and the impact of CoP and social constructivism.

What is IP?

Imposter Phenomenon (IP) has become an established area of study across various aspects of the Social Sciences since the term was first postulated by Clance and Imes (1978). Their focus was high achieving women from several fields meaning that the phenomenon was understood from the outset to affect a cross-section of participants across a variety of environments and contexts. The primary focus of study regarding IP is the nexus between professional and/or skilled practice and identity markers and perceived characteristics and motivations, as understood by individuals who feel that they are 'imposters' within roles they are not only expert and experienced in, but in professional and employment contexts where they have been successful in gaining employment and prestige.

In order to rationalise these feelings, individuals who identify as experiencing IP may characterise their prior achievements as having been gained by good fortune, dismissing their experience, expertise, professional background and successes. The potential for this can lead individuals to experience feelings of insecurity and anxiety, particularly when gauging their abilities and achievements against colleagues perceived as being 'established' or credible (Clance and Imes 1978; Cowman and Ferrari 2002; Hutchins 2015).

Some sources indicate that IP may be widespread, affecting approximately 70% of people from all walks of life at some stage in their careers (Harvey and Katz 1985). However, it is important to recognise that the insecure professional identity inherent to IP is a more complex and nuanced concept than has been represented in some of the existing literature (Knights and Clarke 2014). This means that imposterism may be manifested in a wider range of lived-experiences, and is less homogenous and immutable than previously acknowledged. For example, individuals may experience imposter feelings as a transient or intermittent state, dependent on threats to the security of their conceptions of professional identity (Dickinson, Fowler, and Griffiths 2020; Endres-Parnell and Helvie-Mason 2021). For this reason, throughout this study the authors have adopted the term 'imposter feelings' to encompass this potential spectrum of participants' lived-experiences.

IP in HE

With a growing emphasis on key performance indicators, HE has become a highly competitive, market-led environment. The combination of HE reform, increased student fees, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) initiative, have resulted in staff experiencing increasing demands and constantly changing expectations, with competing priorities in terms of teaching and research (Knights and Clarke 2014; Hutchins 2015; Parkman 2016).

Consequently, staff may be vulnerable to feelings of imposterism (Parkman 2016), unable to fulfil their own idealised understandings of the academic role (Knights and Clarke 2014). Hutchins also suggests that imposter feelings may be exacerbated by 'the "publish or perish" academic culture where performance targets are often vague, support can be inconsistent, and a highly competitive research and funding climate may inadvertently create a setting conducive to feelings of self-doubt and fraudulence' (2015, 4).

For early career academics, these issues may potentially be compounded through the liminality experienced as they adapt to their new role and surroundings within HE. Imposter feelings, as well as a sense of isolation and lack of confidence, are attributed by Keefer (2015) as a common feature of this transition towards a more secure professional identity. There are additional issues around IP for early career academics as studies suggest that a lack of support during induction can result in

feelings of 'falling off a cliff' (Dickinson, Fowler, and Griffiths 2020, 9), given the many assumptions and expectations around delivering lectures or undertaking the myriad tasks associated with the role.

Issues relating to a lack of prior experience in teaching, or formal teaching qualifications (Annon, Lukadi, and Warner 2018; Wilkinson 2019), behaviour management (Wilkinson 2020), as well as interactions with and questions from students (Parkman 2016; Hutchins and Rainbolt 2017) have all been cited as triggers for imposter feelings. These anxieties may be exacerbated by the solitary nature of teaching in HE (Muchmore 2002), with relatively few opportunities to discuss pedagogic issues with colleagues outside of formalised quality assurance processes (Wilkinson 2019).

Developing communities of practice

Developing peer networks may offer support for those experiencing imposter feelings (Cope-Watson and Betts 2010; Gourlay 2011; Hutchins and Rainbolt 2017; Annon, Lukadi, and Warner 2018; Wilkinson 2019), but there has been little exploration of this. Instead, research has typically focused on the impacts of informal forms of peer-support. For example, Cope-Watson and Betts (2010) found that mutual support via email enabled those engaging in peer-support to acknowledge their successes and confront imposter feelings as doctoral students. Similarly, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) found that informal support provided by colleagues helped those experiencing IP to regulate their perceptions of practice, thereby 'making sense of their imposter thoughts and experiences' (209).

Several studies highlight the need for more formalised forms of peer-support planned for and provided by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to support new career academics' transition into academia (Cope-Watson and Betts 2010; Wilkinson 2019, 2020). Where more formal peer-support mechanisms are in place, there is some suggestion that forming larger group networks is preferable to individualised support such as one-to-one mentoring. Bothello and Roulet (2018) suggest that broader support networks offer advantages, including moving away from an over-reliance upon a senior, more experienced colleague in a master-apprentice model, where an imbalance in power dynamics could potentially trigger imposter feelings.

According to Wenger, McDermott and Synder (2002, 30), establishing communities of practice, whereby people 'interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment', could address this issue. CoP may be cultivated over time (Buckley, Steinert, and Nimmon 2019), but can also be naturally occurring. For example, Annon, Lukadi, and Warner (2018) state that one unintended outcome of a planned teaching fellowship programme for new HE staff was a CoP which developed informally and 'organically' (38) from the opportunities provided for participants to engage in collective learning. This resulted in the development of trusting peer-relationships which supported confidence and addressed imposter feelings. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that establishing a CoP is of particular benefit and relevance for early career academics, with higher rates of participation as well as the implementation of new ideas into practice amongst more junior members of staff (Wilson, Wilson, and Witthaus 2020).

The Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) programme and the role of social constructivist pedagogies

Over the past decade, there has been a growing emphasis on developing effective teaching and learning within HE and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has responded by developing and introducing the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), which ensures that those looking for accreditation and membership meet both the required competences outlined, and the values expected, by the HEA. The framework is further used to accredit alternative programmes, often delivered by the HEIs themselves, for university staff to gain accreditation.

This study focuses on the implementation of a Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) programme developed to reflect the requirements of the UKPSF. It introduces participants to the various roles and responsibilities of an academic through the critical exploration of strategies for planning, teaching, assessment and evaluation. Good practice is shared with peers from a range of different perspectives, disciplines and teaching and learning environments. The broader aim is that the participants begin to contextually apply and reflect on their emerging identity, philosophy and practices.

Social constructivism, across a number of subjects and disciplines including education, is established as an understanding of knowledge as socially constructed (Howard and Brady 2015; Salvador Rommel 2019). Assuming this to be evident, establishing pedagogical approaches appropriate to examine imposter feelings in new academic colleagues prompted planning, resourcing and expression in the teaching encounters of this project. With this aim, pedagogical strategies were introduced to provide opportunities for colleagues on the PGCAP to collaborate in order to construct learning. Drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1977), the PGCAP encouraged open and critical discussion between facilitators and peers. This discourse was characterised by an explicit emphasis upon co-constructing reciprocal understanding and a critical examination of underlying assumptions.

A key element of teaching included the use of scenarios to unpick specific elements of practice, for example relating to student engagement, to provide an opportunity for participants to discuss and critically evaluate perceived expectations, processes and values through both reflection and reflexive techniques. Critical reflection was integral to these activities and underpinned the pedagogical philosophy of the PGCAP programme, enabling participants to 'use each other as critical mirrors and sounding boards, providing them with images and interpretations of their practice that often take them by surprise' (Brookfield 2002, 31). Through the deconstruction of shared experiences, participants were able to examine and reframe their understanding of practice, reducing any sense of isolation (Gourlay 2011; Wilkinson 2019) and addressing imposter feelings (Brookfield 2002).

The role of peer-talk was also significant, reflecting research on the importance of talk in developing understanding (McGregor and Gunter 2006; Wright and Taverner 2008). This is supported by the work of Leat and Higgins (2002) and McGrane and Lofthouse (2010) who, amongst others, emphasise the importance of talk and collaboration for shared-construction of understanding. Furthermore, evidence suggests that engaging in discussions around specific elements of pedagogic practice may be particularly important for new educators (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999; Annon, Lukadi, and Warner 2018; Mulholland 2021; Nichol 2021). Goffman (1959) identifies discussions of this nature as 'staging talk', which may have benefits for the professional development of early career academics, given the potential to reduce imposter feelings relating to teaching activities (Wilkinson 2019).

Pyrko, Dörfler, and Eden (2017) also suggest that adopting strategies of collaborative working enables participants to guide and support each other, leading to the development of a CoP. The teaching staff on the PGCAP assumed the development of a positive and beneficial CoP would be one which required consideration of interpersonal and chronological elements, facilitating the emergence of a CoP as a function of time, shared goals and behaviours. Incorporating social constructivist pedagogical approaches into teaching over the course of the programme, supported the formation and development of relationships over time. This means that the PGCAP under discussion can address the solitary nature of teaching, reducing feelings of isolation (Muchmore 2002; Gourlay 2011; Wilkinson 2019).

Research design and methodology

To address the lived-experiences of the specific group of early career academics involved in the PGCAP programme, methodological assumptions were addressed to ensure that the enquiry had rigour and depth. The emotive nature of this research, and the deeply personal elements, were

acknowledged by the research team, and a qualitative case study approach (Yin 2018) was adopted to gain a deeper insight into participants' experiences and perceptions. The research team felt that more insights could be gained from investigating individuals' personal accounts than drawing on institutional statistical data. It was the intense observation of, and enquiry into, individuals' accounts through a case study approach that made revealing new data possible (Flyvberg 2006).

Case study approaches are well-established within education and, given the discipline, focus on experiences of individual foci rather than generalised fields of enquiry (Lytle and Cochran-Smith 1992). Although it is not possible to generalise findings from a case study, the authors propose that this study provides an indicative insight into the impacts arising from the pedagogic strategies utilised in the PGCAP programme. In this way, this research provides a starting point for other educators working on similar programmes to inform judgements about future actions which may be appropriate in their own settings (Rudduck 1985).

Following approval from the HEI's Ethics Committee, participants from the PGCAP programme – including both current students and those who had completed the programme within the past academic year – were invited to take part. To better understand the impacts that social constructivist pedagogies and CoP had upon imposter feelings, invitations were targeted at 'most likely' cases (Flyvbjerg 2006b). These were individuals whose interactions on the PGCAP indicated that they were experiencing imposterism through feelings of fraudulence, self-doubt and lack of confidence. All of these participants self-identified as imposters, and used this term to describe their own lived-experiences of assuming an academic role. This approach is supported by Pettigrew (1990), who suggests that, considering the limited number of cases which can usually be studied, it is logical to select extreme situations in which the process of interest is 'transparently observable' (275). Flyvbjerg also supports this view, arguing that the selection of random or representative cases, 'may not be the most appropriate strategy. This is because the typical or average case is often not the richest in information' (2006, 13).

It is important to acknowledge the positionality of two of the authors, who were both educators for the PGCAP and researchers for this project. This potentially had implications for the reliability of the data, particularly with regard to the emotive nature of participants' lived-experiences. We place this study within the domain of teacher-research, recognising that these authors are inextricably linked to this research in a myriad of ways. This links to the notion of the 'split personality' (Xerri 2016, 97) of those researchers who adopt this dual role. However, we posit that educators are ideally placed to understand the realities of their own working context, drawing from rich analytic frameworks which enable them to 'ask questions that other researchers may not ask, and they see patterns that others may not be able to see' (Lytle and Cochran-Smith 1992, 465).

Once informed consent was obtained, data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Using interviews in this context allowed the researchers to develop a deeper understanding of incidents and experiences that may not be possible through alternative methods of data collection (Mears 2009; Yin 2018). The flexibility of the semi-structured format enabled the interviews to become guided conversations, ensuring that participants were free to express their views, whilst remaining focused on the key research objectives (Adams 2010). The authors also suggest that the pre-existing relationship with participants facilitated the establishment of a rapport between interviewers and interviewees (McConnell-Henry et al. 2010), creating an appropriate environment within which participants felt comfortable to share their experiences.

To address potential issues concerning objectivity, the role of the third member of the research team became particularly important. This author was external to the PGCAP programme, and previously unknown to the participants. This provided a neutral and impartial perspective, without preconceptions gained from previous interactions or experiences of working with the participants. This author was responsible for identifying the interview questions, and for leading discourse throughout the process, to establish clear boundaries (McConnell-Henry,

2010) and ensure a commitment to reliability and validity. Interviews were conducted with five participants, each interviewed by two members of the research team. Due to social distancing restrictions imposed because of the global Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews took place via Microsoft Teams.

Inductive thematic analysis (Thomas 2006) was adopted to investigate the nexus between imposter feelings, lived-experience, and how social constructivist pedagogies may foster developing a CoP. Within the research team, members hold varying research interests and methodological stances; inductive thematic analysis (ITA) allowed them to bracket off their established beliefs in such a way that the data itself, rather than a theory of research, became the focus and source of insights into participants' experiences. The dynamic inherent in using a case study approach followed by an in-depth analysis of data drawn from ITA ensured that the research and data were appropriate, trustworthy and rich.

The research team drew on ITA methodological assumptions and processes to gather, code and identify overarching themes. The team explicitly did 'not' draw on a specific research paradigm but focussed on the data itself as the source of investigation and insight. A general inductive approach 'is evident in much qualitative data analysis [...] often without an explicit label being given to the analysis strategy' (Thomas 2006, 238). Following the procedures outlined by Thomas (2006), data was first prepared in a common format and the research team familiarised themselves with the whole data set to allow the identification of themes and patterns. Following this initial analysis, transcripts were further scrutinised to identify categories or themes. Similar responses were then grouped to allow them to be read 'horizontally', thereby facilitating comparisons within and across categories (Elliot and Gillie 1998; Marshall 1999). The researchers initially undertook this process independently before discussing and refining findings collaboratively through analytic triangulation (Given 2008). Given the dual role of two members of the research team, this triangulation process was particularly important to ensure consistency and the trustworthiness of analysis (Cypress 2017).

Findings and discussion

Findings arising from the study indicate that explicit reference to, and modelling of, social constructivist pedagogies not only informs emerging educators of approaches which can be adapted and used in their practice, but also facilitates dialogue between colleagues across disciplines. The findings suggest that adopting such approaches enhances practitioners' sense of selfhood and leads to an awareness of shared challenges, successes and narratives. In addition, imposter feelings can be articulated explicitly and re-evaluated in forums which are self-affirming and agentially empowering. The main findings from the study indicate that:

- Underlying causes for imposter feelings are multi-faceted, with factors including assuming learning, teaching and assessment responsibilities, interactions and relationships with students and adjusting to university language, culture and systems.
- Social constructivist pedagogical tools which ensure collaboration can support the creation of collegial and mutually empowering CoP, allowing perceived threats to professional identity to be addressed.
- CoP can provide a horizontal alternative to hierarchical support mechanisms for new academics, improving consistency and clarifying expectations when incorporated into existing induction processes.

Underlying causes for imposter feelings in early career academics

This theme explores participants' perceptions relating to the causes and triggers of imposter feelings upon assuming their role.

Challenges presented by teaching responsibilities

References to feeling overwhelmed were common to all respondents. Participants reported a sense of the formidable nature of organisational expectations about teaching, resulting in their feeling unable to meet workload expectations and undertake other essential activities, such as research.

> My first semester was just full-on teaching so I couldn't even look at research at all. Second semester was slightly easier but then you have marking and you have administrative stuff to do ... so I feel like you're constantly catching up (Participant 1).

Specific challenges were presented by a lack of experience in teaching combined with mistaken assumptions of pedagogic expertise, resulting in feelings of disempowerment or imposterism. Already experts in their related disciplines, participants expressed concerns around their ability to teach, leading them to feel inadequately prepared to deliver content to students. This resulted in some feeling '*thrown into things*' (Participant 1), '*unable to speak*' (Participant 1), or compelled to over-prepare for teaching sessions.

> I was so scared of missing things out that I probably overkilled massively and didn't have the confidence to tailor it to what I knew I could deliver ... and the fact that they were there and ask questions and play on their phones and not having that interaction with them, I think was difficult (Participant 2).

These feelings of unpreparedness resonate with the work of Wilkinson (2020), and Dickinson, Fowler, and Griffiths (2020), who provide accounts of early career academics for whom perceptions of prior knowledge or expertise in teaching, as well as an associated dearth of induction or professional support for teaching activities prompted feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. Annon, Lukadi and Warner (2018, 46) also highlight excessive preparation, which can lead to a pattern of behaviour known as the 'Imposter Cycle' whereby overworking is routinely applied to counteract anxiety and imposter feelings and can be perceived as necessary to avoid failure or inadequacy. Participants' accounts emphasise the threat to professional identity presented by teaching activities and responsibilities, underscoring the need for a planned programme of professional development specifically designed to develop an understanding of the learning and teaching process.

Challenges presented by interactions with students

Interactions with students also presented a challenge to the development of a secure professional identity. In part, this was related to the perceived need to provide educational provision which was '*all singing, all dancing*' (Participant 1) or '*jazzy and fun*' (Participant 4). This links to the idea of teaching as a performance (Wilkinson 2019; McCusker 2021) or as entertainment (Dewey 1913; Miller and Bourgeois 2018) where added pressure to provide a 'bells and whistles' learning experience may be at the expense of authentic student engagement. This issue is particularly pertinent given the current environment of HE, where student feedback is considered a key indicator of success (Young and Jerome 2020).

Participants' accounts also demonstrated that there were challenges around managing student behaviour within lectures and seminars, both in addressing disruptive activities and ensuring engagement.

> if somebody was speaking and they were talking and I said "Hang on a second, it's really rude to be speaking while somebody else is talking" and she took it really personally. You know that looks could kill bit. And the next week she came in and she stomped her books down and she said "I haven't done any of the pre-reading" and if they haven't done the pre-reading you were supposed to send them out of the group and I thought if I send her out of the group she's gonna be ... so I just thought you sit there, you haven't done the pre-work, that's not a problem, and then she was like "I'm not doing this" (Participant 2).

In addition, participants also highlighted occurrences of overt challenges to professional judgement, particularly relating to marking and assessment.

when it comes down to now like the marking and assessment stuff. I think that's where I sort of struggle in terms of confidence [. . .] when maybe given someone a mark they weren't expecting, I think it was, well, when I got a bad mark, I would never blame the lecturer. I used to just blame myself and ask for feedback [. . .] I'm just shocked that a lot of students would have a go and challenge the marks a lot and I think I wasn't expecting that because I just wasn't that type of student myself so I think that caught me off guard a little bit (Participant 5).

Issues relating to behaviour management in HE emerge elsewhere in the literature (Wilkinson 2020) and are concerning as evidence suggests that in other educational settings managing behaviour is cited as one of the most challenging aspects of teaching practice for both new and existing educators (EEF, 2019). These accounts also potentially reflect the shifting political landscape, with the neo-liberalisation of the HE marketplace resulting in increased student fees and elevated student expectations and demands (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg 2017; Tomlinson, Enders, and Naidoo 2020).

There is also some suggestion that the established role of the academic as a deliverer of knowledge, or 'sage on a stage' (King 1993, 30), is increasingly untenable (McCusker 2021). For example, some participants described their fear of direct challenges from students relating to subject knowledge and reflected upon their perceived struggles to establish credibility. This was attributed to their age, gender or ethnicity, revealing a stereotypical perception of the academic as an '*older white male*' (Participant 1). Participants additionally reflected on the coping strategies they developed to establish status, including the use of academic titles, qualifications and published research.

I think because I'm younger as well, that does sometimes play on my mind a little bit. That I think I have to sort of prove myself a little bit more. [. . .] I have to try to introduce myself, tell them where I come from and [. . .] I've got a bit of credibility to be like, No, I'm not just a PhD student covering a lecture for one of the professors, I am the lecturer (Participant 5).

I'm not an older white male who can just talk about my intuition and people will listen and around my experience and people will listen. I kind of have to use everything that I've achieved to put on display and kind of say "This is me. So, listen to me because what I say matters". (Participant 1).

These fears are congruent with other findings (Knights and Clarke 2014; Wilkinson 2019) and reflect underlying causes of imposter feelings for some as they struggle to conform to their perception of a stereotypical, or idealised, academic (Bhopal 2016). The coping strategies constitute examples of 'protective practices' as described by Goffman (1959, 222), whereby 'performers can save their own show' (ibid, 222) by consciously presenting qualifications and past achievements as markers of success in attempting to establish credibility with students.

Challenges presented by the role of the academic, university systems, procedures and culture

Participants indicated that imposter feelings were increased by cultural barriers, including a lack of understanding of HE systems and procedures. The language of academia, and in particular the numerous acronyms used to describe basic systems and procedures, were cited as introducing an additional level of complexity.

I had no idea what a lot of the phrases people were using around academic things meant at all. So they would talk about PABs and all sorts of things that I had no idea what it was and so I kind of learned that as I went along as well (Participant 2).

In addition to this issue of language, the rhythm of the academic year was a source of concern.

they said to me, these are the people who are first marking and these are the people who are second marking. Well, what they didn't tell me was this was the first year they had academic staff mark through June, July, August. That summer holidays were really sacred. And so, coming from retail, we didn't really . . . you know I had two weeks in the summer if I was lucky and that was it (Participant 2).

This confusion surrounding the norms of the academy reflects the seemingly impenetrable culture within HEIs. These new career academics' accounts evidence the culture shock which can be experienced by colleagues entering HE. This is reflected in hyperbolic metaphors such as 'landed

on the moon' (Gourlay 2011, 595) or entering 'Oz through a tornado' (Warnock 2019, 35), high-lighting that 'Entry into academia means new codes to learn, new roles to play, and new ways to be' (Cope-Watson and Betts 2010, 6).

Participants additionally reported challenges presented by facets of the roles and responsibilities of a contemporary academic. They expressed a desire for a more thorough induction, including increased amounts of general and routine information relating to their employment, for example key dates, deadlines and arrangements for annual leave. Without this, they felt they were left to learn these procedures '*on the fly*' (Participant 1). This aggravated existing imposter feelings, leading some participants to feel dependent upon help and guidance from more experienced, and busy, colleagues.

> Oh my God, you constantly kind of feel like you need to ask people things, or you email your line manager . . . and sometimes you think, am I being too needy? Or am I asking too many questions? (Participant 1).

Combined, these accounts suggest that adapting to the distinct culture of academia may inspire additional threats to professional identity, and an increase in imposter feelings as new career academics struggle to adjust to the competing priorities and responsibilities of a fluid role, which requires individuals to delicately balance the disparate demands of the research/teaching nexus (Tight 2016). For those already experiencing imposter feelings, the perceived need to excel in response to these competing demands, thereby fulfilling idealised understandings of the role of the academic (Knights and Clarke 2014), can worsen anxieties and insecurities as 'the real or imagined demands of others invariably exceed the capacity of ordinary human beings to meet them' (Knights and Willmott 2002, 72).

Additionally, a sense of tension existed between the value of professional and academic expertise. A lack of practical experience meant that participants with an academic background on professional programmes had feelings of insecurity and anticipated threats to their credibility.

> you are constantly looking over your shoulder about what you're teaching students because you haven't had 30 years' experience [. . .] you're talking about stuff and big theoretical terms whereas you've got the trainer who can then constantly go on their own experience and so that creates an environment of kind of us versus them, academic versus trainers . . . well, the academics said this but don't worry this is what we do in practice. You're constantly thinking about it, you're constantly worrying [. . .] so those are the extra pressures that you have in the back of your mind on top of everything else that you're dealing with (Participant 1).

Conversely, for new career academics with significant professional experience, but a less-established track record of high-quality research outputs, imposter feelings resulted from the need to adapt to the distinct culture, currency, and values of HE.

> it feels like you're going back to the beginning. So, you go back from a place of knowing [. . .] you know the procedures and you knew what to do and you kind of had that confidence that comes with having dealt with people for a long time [. . .] I think, over the years, that experience means that you just have that confidence and I think you don't take knockbacks so personally, because it's not a personal thing 'cause you know it isn't . . . that's just how it is sometimes, and it kind of felt like going back to knowing nothing (Participant 2).

This notion of '*going back to the beginning*' is significant, and reflects findings elsewhere, in which joining the academy from practice results in a perceived a loss of status or being 'right at the bottom of the tree' (Gourlay 2011, 595). When considered together, these accounts illustrate a disconnect in what is valued across HE. This echoes suggestions that the current response to the REF has led some UK HEIs to prioritise the recruitment of individuals with a proven track record in research – 'career academics' – over those with practical or professional experience (Pilcher et al. 2017). However, there is also some evidence that this drive conflicts with the expectations and values of students, for whom relevant industrial or professional expertise is prioritised (Buckley, Soilemetzidis, and Hillman 2015; Pilcher et al. 2017). Consequently, for new career academics, meeting the opposing demands and expectations of students and the academy results in threats to professional identity.

Promoting communities of practice through social constructivist pedagogical approaches

Participants' accounts endorsed the social constructivist pedagogical approaches adopted throughout the PGCAP programme. All responses contained assertions that the opportunities for discussion integral to the design of PGCAP sessions resulted in peer-interactions which were affirmative in nature, leading participants to feel less isolated, assuaging imposter feelings caused by self-doubt and a perceived lack of knowledge and expertise.

> it was just realising that everybody had the same kind of feelings and the same problems and this was what they'd done about it [...] there was a real mix of experience, a real mix of everything but it was really nice that people had the same problems as you, and the same issues as you and then you could kind of go "Oh wow" and it was a safe space to talk about things (Participant 2).

The university-wide nature of the PGCAP programme meant participants were drawn from a range of disciplines, thereby facilitating exploration of a range of viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences.

> it was great that we had that diversity in terms of colleagues from different departments. And disciplines also shape how you approach teaching, in some ways [...] I would say that diversity was a real richness in terms drawing on how colleagues structured activities, some of the strategies that they use to promote student engagement. And some of the feedback strategies as well. I thought it was really, really rich (Participant 4).

These accounts are congruent with the work of Brookfield (2002), emphasising that discussions around practice enable participants to become aware that challenges which may have been perceived as unique, or specific to their own working context, are commonplace. This sharing of experiences is vital, allowing participants to feel part of a mutually-supportive CoP (Cope-Watson and Betts 2010; Annon, Lukadi, and Warner 2018; Wilkinson 2019). This supportive nature ensures that potential feelings of isolation which can result in unjustified feelings of incompetence, or imposterism, are reduced (Berlak and Berlak 1981).

The benefits arising from opportunities for peer-discussion also highlight specific elements of social constructivist pedagogy. For example, through the examination of theoretical models for reflective practice (Schon 1983; Brookfield 1995) participants used reflection as a means of identifying strengths and future actions.

> I think the real practical use of reflection as a tool to develop rather than going over something and just using it to say how bad you are all the time or to beat yourself up with (Participant 2).

This echoes the work of Elbaz (1987), who describes the destructive tendency of educators experiencing IP to assume full culpability for perceived failures. Through increased understanding and use of Brookfield's (2002) Lenses of Critically Reflective Teaching, this participant used reflections upon past experiences as leverage for the development of future practice.

It was also suggested that increased understanding of social constructivist theory enabled some participants to develop their own pedagogic practice. For one participant, for example, teaching and relationships with students had previously been a considerable source of anxiety and a trigger for imposter feelings. Developing an understanding of the importance of relationships in successful teaching and learning encouraged a shift in pedagogic approach.

> I think it has made me think much more about the student experience as well, so from the student's point of view. So, certainly last semester with the group that I knew I was going to have for two semesters, so if you don't form that bond straight away it's gonna be a really difficult process. So, you know even though I was thinking, "Oh, new semester, ugh!" The minute I walked through the door, I smiled and was like, "I had a good summer", which maybe wasn't how I was feeling exactly but I think I recognise a bit more the importance of . . . They don't know you very well so actually that's how you act. That it is a performance, in inverted commas, but it is a performance. My perception was that you stand at the front behind the lectern and read off the slides, and actually having the confidence to move away and move around the room and speak to people and talk to them by name makes a real difference (Participant 2).

This demonstrates how this participant's understanding of effective pedagogic practice supports and underpins their academic identity as an educator Their recognition of the importance of establishing positive relationships with students reflects a growing consensus across the literature that these play an integral role in securing motivation and engagement for learning (Wentzel 2009). However, it is significant that, for this participant, this is part of 'a performance', where they feel compelled to present a non-authentic version of self to manage and shape how they are perceived by the student 'audience' (Goffman 1959).

This can therefore be seen as a deliberately deployed coping strategy through which this participant seeks to establish credibility in interactions with students, and to overcome feelings of imposterism. This can also be seen to add nuance to the findings of Pekkarinen, Hirsto, and Nevgi (2020) whose findings posit that emotional connection is not required to unpin perceptions of pedagogical competency. The findings within this study indicate that constructivist pedagogies imbue positive emotional connections between participants that do not necessitate explicit articulation of them. The authors therefore suggest that explicit consideration of the role of relationships in influencing early academics' perceptions of pedagogic and professional competency should inform induction and professional development processes and procedures.

Communities of practice as a horizontal alternative to hierarchical support mechanisms for new academics

Another outcome emerging from the implementation of a social constructivist approach was that the resulting CoP fostered an alternative, more egalitarian or horizontal support structure. An emergent theme reflected early career academics reluctance to seek support from existing departmental structures when faced with challenges or elements of the role for which they felt underprepared, because they felt '*ashamed to ask questions because you don't want people to think that you don't know the answers to some of the basic questions*' (Participant 1). Accounts suggested that this was the result of the hierarchical nature of these structures and reflected concerns about the implications of asking questions and requiring support for probation outcomes.

> You don't want to be going up to leadership in your first semester in what is quite a comprehensive probation and being like, "I'm not doing well, I'm not having great experiences. I don't feel like I'm doing students justice". [. . .] So, I mean, I did have some words with the programme lead [. . .] she came into one of my lectures early on and kind of just gave me the thumbs up, but that was the extent of it. [. . .] It just didn't make me feel any better really about what was going on (Participant 3).

This account also suggests that support within these hierarchical structures was often insufficient to counteract pre-existing imposter feelings. This is congruent with Wilkinson (2019), for whom routine and hierarchical university quality assurance processes resulted in 'inauthentic practice and relationships' as she adapted her usual teaching practice to appease an external observer. Furthermore, Annon, Lukadi, and Warner (2018) state that new career academics may experience challenges because of a perceived need to manage the expectations of new colleagues, also suggesting that admitting vulnerability in seeking support may be problematic.

In contrast, the peer-support resulting from the development of a CoP through the PGCAP was seen much more positively. There was a sense that the deliberate and 'planned for' nature of the support created a '*safe space*' (Participant 2) for reflection and the consideration of issues relating to professional development and practice. This had positive implications for addressing imposter feelings and developing a more secure professional identity.

> I think it's having formalised support. You know, I think that's really, really important and having some structure to support as well. So having, you know, those regular hours that's, you know, dedicated to growing basically as an educator is really important (Participant 4).

Accounts indicated that the pedagogy adopted allowed the participants' challenges and successes to be shared in a non-judgemental and supportive environment. This empowered participants, enabling individuals to recognise that their experiences were not unusual or indicative of failing as new educators, and provided an opportunity to approach their peers within the PGCAP programme for support, confident in their justification of requesting it.

> there were probably some people who were similarly dropped into experiencing similar challenges. And then there were some people with more experience, but they felt probably more approachable and less tied to your probation outcomes and so on to have that frank conversation (Participant 4).

In addition, some participants felt empowered by offering peer-support through their interactions with others in the PGCAP cohort.

> the biggest benefit was just the community. [...] it was more like a supportive community seeing other people struggle and also feeling like I had a voice for some other people in the group. And because I was quite vocal, and probably too often, but enough to get people to listen to us [...] there was action taken [...] And it was sinking some people so I was glad that could be a little bit of voice for that (Participant 3).

This account suggests that taking agency in supporting peers can also address imposter feelings and support development of a secure professional identity. This supports other findings which demonstrate the potential of reciprocal support (Cope-Watson and Betts 2010; Annon, Lukadi, and Warner 2018). How identity and agency is encountered by participants draws attention to the ways in which hierarchy is both assumed and imposed, but also how this can be reconceptualised on programmes where a shared experience is valued over that of a dialectical approach to teaching and learning. It is this philosophy of practice, as evidenced through social constructivist pedagogical choices and models, which supports the negation or reconceptualisation of hierarchy. These findings demonstrate that the nexus between assumptions of capability and how hierarchy informs this is central.

Conclusions and recommendations

In this article, the authors have examined the implications surrounding the use of social constructivist pedagogical approaches to establish a CoP and underpin the construction of a more secure professional identity. This case study offers insight into the lived-experiences of new career academics and the ways in which these were impacted by undertaking a PGCAP programme aimed at supporting their professional development.

This article adds to the body of existing knowledge relating to IP in HE by providing authentic accounts demonstrating that underlying causes for imposter feelings are multi-faceted, stemming from a range of factors as discussed above. The authors propose that to better support new career academics, HEIs must acknowledge and understand threats to the development of a secure professional identity. Improving existing induction processes is key, together with providing focused continuing professional development opportunities. The authors argue that this has positive implications for staff wellbeing, providing a more holistically supportive environment and ensuring that HEIs attract and retain a high-quality workforce (Parkman 2016).

This article endorses the introduction and implementation of social constructivist pedagogies to support new career academics. These pedagogies, underpinned by models of critical reflection (Brookfield 2002), provide opportunities for peer-discussion, reciprocal support, and a forum for participants to identify and challenge imposter feelings. These findings are congruent with the wider literature demonstrating the powerful role of peer-support in confronting such feelings (Cope-Watson and Betts 2010; Annon, Lukadi, and Warner 2018; Wilkinson 2019).

However, this article extends existing knowledge by demonstrating the potential of a planned intervention to formalise these activities. The PGCAP programme provided a regular, timetabled space for new career academics to discuss and evaluate their shared experiences and the authors propose that the purposefully deployed social constructivist pedagogies it contained were

instrumental in scaffolding the intended development of a mutually empowering CoP. This has the potential to provide a more egalitarian alternative to the existing hierarchical support mechanisms currently prevalent in HE.

The article demonstrates that a more horizontal support structure has the potential to circumvent perceived issues of power which can become problematic within traditional mentor-mentee relationships (O'Neill and Sankowsky 2001; Cowin et al. 2012; Bothello and Roulet 2018) whilst also alleviating the anxieties of new career academics about seeking assistance from more experienced and over-burdened colleagues. The accounts explored within this study also demonstrate that the process of providing peer-support can be an empowering act, allowing new career academics to dismiss imposterism, develop increased confidence and gain a more secure understanding of their emerging identity as an academic.

Combined, these findings offer a potential strategy for HEIs to improve existing provision relating to induction and support for academics joining the academy. The authors contend that there is value in further exploration of the planned use of social constructivist pedagogies to scaffold the development of a CoP as part of induction processes to further support early career academics transitioning into the challenging and fast-paced world of academia.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Kirstin Mulholland Before taking an academic post at Northumbria University, Kirstin was a class teacher, senior leader, and Specialist Leader of Education in primary schools in the North East for more than 13 years. Kirstin is currently the Initial Teacher Education subject lead for Modern Foreign Languages, and also contributes to the English and Maths elements of our Education programmes. She is one of the module leaders for the Educational Research and Enquiry strand of the BA (Hons) Primary Education programme. Kirstin completed her MEd and EdD at the University of Newcastle, and also holds an MLitt in Latin American Literature. She has a particular interest in teacher research; perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning; and the role of student voice in developing pedagogy.

David Nichol David is a qualified teacher in the Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) sector. He joined Northumbria, as an academic, in 2006 and most recently has been programme lead for Northumbria's PCET provision. David currently leads a module on the Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice, a programme aimed at all new academic staff at Northumbria and, in collaboration with colleagues, delivers teacher training programmes to Post Graduate Research students who express an interest in perusing an academic career. At a national level, David is a member of the University Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) Further Education committee. This affords him the opportunity to help formulate and develop national policy and share good practice with colleagues working in Universities, training providers and Further Education Colleges across the UK. He is also a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education academy. As a PhD student, his current research focusses on establishing the ways in which students experience, conceptualise and understand the numerous technology enhanced learning opportunities made available to them, together with the intentions of the academic staff in providing them.

Aidan Gillespie Prior to joining the Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing team at Northumbria University, Aidan was Senior Lecturer in Primary Education at Canterbury Christchurch university. Aidan came to Initial Teacher Education having had a successful career as a primary school teacher, teaching in Lincoln, Italy, London and Kent. Now as Initial Teacher Education subject lead for Religious Education, he designs and teaches modules focussed on the role of religion in state education in the UK and the way in which religion, society and values intersect. With a research focus on spirituality, Aidan is deeply interested in the intersection between spirituality and professional identity. Alongside his work in Initial Teacher Education, Aidan also teaches on Masters and postgraduate programmes in Education, and is the co-programme lead for the Professional Doctorate study route.

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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