

## 15 minutes to develop your research career

### Podcast Transcript

#### Episode 4: Overcoming imposter syndrome

**Claire Doffegnies:** "Sometimes I wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot and I think, 'I can't do this, I'm a fraud.' So who said that? We'll tell you at the end. Imposter syndrome is a bit of a hot topic in academia at the moment. There's so many tweets, blog posts, articles about it. Last year, one of our research stories on [Author Services](#) touched upon the topic of imposter syndrome. Someone spoke about their difficulty in recognizing herself as a researcher, feeling like an imposter or inadequate, being stuck, disorientated and intellectually, as well as socially, isolated. This is the [Taylor & Francis](#) and [Vitae](#) podcast on developing your research career. I'm Claire Doffegnies from Taylor & Francis.

**Marie Thouaille:** And I'm Marie Thouaille from Vitae.

**Claire Doffegnies:** Settle in for the next 15 minutes as we explore imposter syndrome. What is imposter syndrome?

**Dr. Katryna Kolawsky:** A worry that you may be found out because you feel like a fraud.

**Claire Doffegnies:** How can you overcome it?

**Lydia Mantay:** I made friends with imposter syndrome, I stopped fighting it.

**Claire Doffegnies:** Today, we're at the [Vitae](#) Inclusive Researcher Development Conference in London and we're going to start by asking some of the people here their thoughts on the topic.

**Speaker 4:** So for me, imposter syndrome is thinking that you're not worthy of being a researcher, that there are people around you who know more than you, who are going to finish their thesis before you, who are just better than you. For myself as a mature student and as a part-time student who has a job and a family, that's even more so. So I've come back into academia after 20 years, so I literally am an imposter.

**Speaker 5:** I think it's quite common and particularly amongst women, as I understand it, I mean, I suppose it's traditionally this English idea that to be proud of what you do can be seen as boastful and that it's, I suppose, giving people a vocabulary that allows them to be proud, but somehow inclusive in the way that they describe themselves and their progress and success.

**Speaker 6:** So we talk about the imposter syndrome on our mentoring training workshops, we offer the mentoring program to our early career research fellows. On the training day, the trainer actually takes just the mentors through what the imposter syndrome is to make the mentors aware of it so that they can recognize it in their mentees and we talk them through it and how it's completely normal and how to, not deal with it because everyone does go through it and deal with it, but the different kind of coping mechanisms.

**Speaker 4:** You never look down from the knowledge you didn't have maybe a year ago. You're always looking up and thinking, "What have I not got?" Maybe that's the nature of doing research is you're always reminded of what you don't know, more than any other job. So the more we can talk about it and the more that we all know that it is absolutely natural, that's the better for it.

**Claire Doffegnies:** Now we're going to be joined by a couple of people who work at universities to hear their thoughts on imposter syndrome.

**Dr. Katryna Kolawsky:** I'm Dr. Katryna Kolawsky and I'm the postgraduate researcher, student development officer at [Loughborough University](#). I work in the graduate school and I'm also connected to the Center of Academic Practice, but I also lead on our doctoral wellbeing and support project.

**Dr. Mark Proctor:** I'm Dr. Mark Proctor from the [University of Sunderland](#), and I'm a research and developer there who organizes staff, research staff and research student development programs.

**Marie Thouaille:** So we thought we'd start by asking you both if you could tell us a little bit about imposter syndrome.

**Dr. Katryna Kolawsky:** I have come across that I've come across it personally. I've been a doctoral student, so I know what it's like. So I guess if I was to summarize what imposter syndrome is, I describe it as perhaps thinking that others may have an inflated sense of what your abilities are, or a worry that you may be found out because you feel like a fraud and sometimes feeling that any success that you have is probably down to working really hard, or just luck.

**Dr. Mark Proctor:** For me, it's just a part of natural reflection, looking at who you are. When you start something new, something you've never done before, then you immediately question yourself and your abilities.

**Marie Thouaille:** So there's a lot of talk about imposter syndrome in academia at the moment. Why do you think it's such a prominent issue for researchers in particular?

**Dr. Katryna Kolawsky:** I don't think it's a new issue. I think it's an issue that's been occurring for quite some time. And it's not just in academia. I think it's in any, perhaps new job, but I guess from the perspective of researchers, because you are entering a new environment, I guess, so perhaps you've just come from an undergraduate. You may have been high flying and then doing a doctorate, it is very experiential. So it's learning through doing, so you could face brick walls now and again, it's that roller coaster and you might not be used to the lows. You might just be used to the highs.

You're also surrounded by lots of experts, perhaps people that you aspire to be. So lecturers, senior lectures, professors. What you don't realize is that those people have also been on that rollercoaster journey, but you won't know what their journey has been because lots of people don't announce their, I don't want to say failures, but times where they've hit hardship with academia, what else. You only see the positive.

**Marie Thouaille:** Do you think there's something about the kinds of processes that people go through as researchers and as doctoral researchers? So I'm thinking of going to conferences and perhaps facing hostile questioning, or going through peer review, or dealing with lots of rejections, competing for funding applications? All of these things are highly competitive and can be really scary. I wonder if that plays into imposter syndrome as well?

**Dr. Katryna Kolawsky:** It could do. So you mentioned peer review and that's when you do get critique from experts in the field. Sometimes as a researcher, an early stage researcher, you have to develop some kind of a thick skin to deal with those comments, but view them constructively. It can be quite daunting if you've invested a lot of time and effort, blood, sweat, and tears into a topic and you're putting yourself out there, whether it is in a publication or going to a conference, and you might feel a little bit apprehensive about the questions, "Well, what if I can't answer it?" You've got that element of self-doubt, but I think that's a natural process to go through. I think a lot of people will be thinking that, but ultimately what I'd say to our researchers are use any feedback you get positively because everybody does want you to succeed. Any feedback you get, whether you view that as negative or positive is ultimately so you can feed forward.

**Dr. Mark Proctor:** So what's interesting is that you've mentioned conferences and things, but to get that recognition that they need to engage with something like conferences to be recognized as a good researcher by their peers. So actually the challenges can be, or are the opportunities to develop their researcher identities.

**Marie Thouaille:** If you could give researchers one top tip for combating imposter syndrome, what would it be?

**Dr. Katryna Kolawsky:** Okay, I'd say talk to others, be honest with how you feel, because chances are that others are feeling the same way as you and hopefully that will encourage you and give you some confidence in yourself.

**Dr. Mark Proctor:** In addition to that, be kind to yourself, pat yourself on the back when things are going very well. If you're feeling a little low, then remember what you've accomplished already.

**Lydia Mantay:** My name is Lydia Mantay, and I've just recently submitted my PhD on the topic of researcher identity development of PhD students. Basically how PhD students progress from being a student towards calling themselves and feeling like a researcher. In direct response to the question, what makes you feel like researchers? I found that students would usually say it was that range of formal and informal social experiences that students would talk about and what made them feel like researchers.

The informal was very dominant in students' conversations and that related to what makes me feel like I am part of this and I'm actually being a researcher and I'm acting as a researcher because they felt in those informal situations, they felt comfortable sharing their knowledge or sharing their expertise with authority, without thinking or feeling like an impostor because they felt equal. Whereas in the formal events and formal situations, of course they feel the [inaudible 00:08:50], they feel the sense of separation and not quite being on par with let's call them the real academics.

I guess the imposter syndrome almost disappears in an informal sort of setting, even if it includes other academics and researchers. But if it's a casual chat and we're talking about research over lunch, let's say, this feeling like an imposter is not as present as in a conference presentation sort of setting.

I think there's a bit of an acceptance that this is part of the deal, that this is part of becoming a researcher, this is part of becoming an academic. I still feel like that, even when I submitted it, I didn't feel like I 100% earned it because I know the ins and outs of this research. I know its weaknesses, I know exactly what examiners could be coming back to ask me to rework because I know, I know what else there is to know that I don't know yet. That's the nature of research, isn't it? We always strive to know more and the more we know, the more we know that we don't know anything. So certainly, absolutely it continues.

I think that's not necessarily a bad thing. I made friends with imposter syndrome. I really am friends with it. I stopped fighting it. It drives me.

**Claire Doffegnies:** So from all the people that we've spoken to today, it's clear that imposter syndrome is a really important issue in researcher wellbeing at the moment and we're starting to get a clearer picture of what it actually is and how you might overcome it if you are experiencing it. Now we're going to a more global perspective on the pressures facing researchers today, talking to David Uribe from the [European University Association](#).

**Marie Thouaille:** Starting very broadly, what do you think are the main pressures and challenges facing researchers today?

**David Uribe:** Well, I can point several, but I would like maybe to start by competition. So research nowadays is a global activity and doctoral studies are becoming from the interest of young people. So regions where the aim in the past was to complete a college or university studies are evolving. Now the aim is to get higher degrees. In addition, well-known research intensive universities are becoming global, receiving high competitive people from all parts of the world. I think the most important here is that this competition is not only at the level of getting a working place in our researcher lab or at the university, but is becoming now how to compete to win projects, to win funding, to attract partners for collaborative projects or multi-disciplinary research.

This leads to my second pressure, transferable skills. So now a researcher have to face that they have to develop a series of skills that maybe she or he didn't imagine that will be necessary in research. Communication skills, team leadership, project management, marketing, entrepreneurial. This is now necessary to be a researcher.

Beyond this, there are also extra challenges that arise from technology and in the engagement with society. A researcher in the past had a good idea of what is good behavior and good practices in research, but not necessarily what's conscious about code of ethics for example, research integrity. Another example is the digital era that contributes to provide more information and resources to the researcher. But this doesn't mean that the work is easier nowadays for the researcher, on the contrary. Now, when applying for national or European funding, we have to face a concept like open

access. The conventional way to get scientific approval by peers by only reviewing the papers, it's coming to an end.

**Marie Thouaille:** How have these pressures changed in the past 12 months, particularly given the global political climate, for example, Brexit?

**David Uribe:** The two current main political issues at current, Brexit and Trump, are certainly keeping the attention of all researchers around the world. In particular, what I can see is both situations share a common concern, implications in the professional mobility programs and the future potential partnerships. This is what is adding new pressure. Brexit is even more complex because it's happening without really yet starting. There are concerns about distribution of funding and new research policies could arise affecting current research programs.

**Marie Thouaille:** Finally, what top tip would you give to institutions and supervisors supporting their researchers?

**David Uribe:** Well, my main tip to institution and supervisors is to think that investing in career development support for researchers will generate a win-win situation and career development that should be supported by a tailored training, combining actions to develop transferable skills and providing professional career mentoring. When I'm referring to mentoring, I'm not saying scientific mentor, but another professional that is providing advice beyond the scientific activity. For example, an industry expert, a businessman, an alumni could provide this kind of mentoring.

One last idea that I would like to express here is nowadays universities have reached maturity in the professionalization of doctoral schools, where they have collected a series of good practices that can be easily extend and adapted to provide continuity in these services for postdoctoral and early stage researchers. So it is not necessary to construct from zero.

**Claire Doffegnies:** We've heard some really interesting insights today about imposter syndrome and the other issues facing researchers. We're now going to finish with three top tips from Vitae about how to look after your wellbeing as a researcher, whether you're struggling with imposter syndrome, self-doubt, or any other challenge you might face.

**Marie Thouaille:** So our first tip is be aware, but not alarmed. Sometimes just being aware that you're being a perfectionist or over-committing can be enough to stop you doing it. So review your behaviors and try to identify patterns that get in your way.

**Claire Doffegnies:** Think positively, concentrate on what you have and what you have the potential to create rather than any negatives. Look for opportunities and wins instead of shortcomings and faults.

**Marie Thouaille:** And finally, make time for things that make you happy and are not work-related.

**Claire Doffegnies:** You might recall that at the start of the podcast, we asked you a question, who said this? "Sometimes I wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot and, 'I think I can't do

this. I'm a fraud.' " So, believe it or not, multi award-winning actress Kate Winslet was actually the person who said that, which I think just goes to show that anyone can experience imposter syndrome. It is normal and it can definitely be overcome. Thank you very much for listening. We'll see you here next time.