

Work-Life Balance in Inclusive Education: Understanding the Roles of Impostor Experiences and Perfectionism among Early-Career Higher Education Educators

Chithra Vimal¹, Dr. Elgin Alexander²

¹Research Scholar, APJ Abdul Kalam Technological University, Thiruvananthapuram, Saintgits College of Engineering (Autonomous), Kottayam, chithra.vimal@saintgits.org

²Associate Professor & HOD, Department of Business Administration, Saintgits College of Engineering (Autonomous), Kottayam, elgin.alexander@saintgits.org

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ABSTRACT:

Inclusive higher education is not a sustainable goal unless educator well-being is recognized as a fundamental component of institutional design, rather than a peripheral concern or an individual responsibility. Against this background, the present study examines the relationship between impostor experiences, perfectionism, and work-life balance among early-career higher education educators, with particular emphasis on their implications for inclusive educational environments. Data were gathered from 164 educators employed at private self-financing MBA colleges in Kerala, South India, and were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Structured questionnaires developed by the leading authors were used for the purpose of data collection. The study focused on early career educators who are likely more vulnerable to impostor syndrome, and also the emerging academic workforce, who are likely to play a main role in the long-term implementation of sustainability in inclusive education. Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) was conducted to further evaluate structural differences across gender groups. The findings indicated that impostor syndrome adversely impacts work-life balance. Perfectionism mediates the relationship between impostor syndrome and work-life balance, indicating that perfectionistic pressures associated with impostor feelings intensify work-life imbalance. Multi-Group Analysis verified that the adverse effects of impostor syndrome endure across gender groups, with no significant structural disparities detected. The findings offer implications for higher education leaders, particularly in developing well-being interventions that can strengthen both educator sustainability and inclusive educational practices.

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1. Introduction

Higher education classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of gender, sexual identity, digital engagement, and students' emotional and learning needs. At the same time, educators face growing demands, blurred work-life boundaries, and varying levels of institutional support (Chakravarty & Satpathy, 2026). Their responsibilities extend beyond teaching to include research, administration, curriculum development, community engagement, and professional development. Teaching is therefore considered a demanding profession, as educators must address not only academic requirements but also the behavioural, emotional, and developmental needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Brady et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2005; Herman et al., 2020).

In the Indian context, teaching practices increasingly emphasize equitable participation, culturally responsive interaction, and context-sensitive pedagogy, which contribute to student engagement and well-being (Grewal, 2019). Since inclusive education is fundamentally relational, educator well-being is an important condition for sustaining inclusive practices (Sarwar et al., 2021; Hernández-Ledesma et al., 2025). However, the increasing demands placed on educators may create psychological pressures that affect their ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance (WLB). Among these, impostor syndrome (IS) and perfectionism (PE) are particularly relevant.

Impostor syndrome, also referred to as impostor phenomenon or perceived fraudulence, involves persistent self-doubt and feelings of being intellectually or professionally inadequate despite evidence of competence and achievement (Clance & Imes, 1978; Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991). Individuals experiencing IS may attribute their achievements to luck, favourable circumstances, or other external factors rather than to their own abilities (Huecker et al., 2023). Academic environments characterized by continuous evaluation, performance expectations, peer comparison, and the "publish or perish" culture can further intensify such feelings (Mulholland et al., 2022; Hutchins &

Rainbolt, 2016). These experiences may be especially relevant to early-career educators, who are establishing their professional identity while managing teaching, research, institutional responsibilities, and career advancement. Previous research has associated IS with stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and maladaptive perfectionism (Alrayyes et al., 2020; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Pakozdy et al., 2023).

Perfectionism is closely related to these experiences. It involves setting excessively high standards and engaging in critical self-evaluation, often accompanied by a strong desire to achieve flawless performance (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Although perfectionism can sometimes support achievement, excessive perfectionistic tendencies may increase psychological pressure and make it difficult for individuals to accept mistakes or disengage from work (Thompson et al., 2000). For educators working in demanding academic environments, such tendencies may contribute to greater work involvement and reduced time for personal and family life.

Work-life balance refers to an individual's ability to manage work and non-work responsibilities while minimizing conflict between the two domains (Siem et al., 2025). Maintaining WLB can be particularly challenging in higher education because teaching, research, administrative responsibilities, student support, publication demands, and institutional service often extend beyond formal working hours (Lewis & Humbert, 2010; Bisht et al., 2026). Persistent imbalance may affect educators' family relationships, emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and overall happiness (Griffin, 2022).

Taken together, these concerns suggest that IS and PE may have important implications for the WLB of early-career higher education educators. Understanding these relationships is particularly relevant to inclusive higher education because sustainable inclusion depends not only on supporting diverse students but also on creating conditions in which educators can perform their roles without compromising their own well-

being. The present study therefore examines the roles of impostor experiences and perfectionism in the work-life balance of early-career higher education educators.

2. Methodology

- **Design:** The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between impostor syndrome, perfectionism, and work-life balance among early-career higher education educators.
- **Participants/Sample:** Data were collected from 200 educators working in private self-financing MBA colleges in Kerala, through convenience sampling. Educators with 0–5 years of work experience were considered eligible. After excluding incomplete and poor-quality responses, 164 valid responses were retained for analysis, comprising 76 (46%) male and 88 (54%) female educators. Sample adequacy was assessed using the 10-times rule and G*Power. It indicated a minimum sample of 134 for a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), 80% statistical power, $\alpha = 0.05$, and two predictors.
- **Instruments:** Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale. IS was measured using the 20-item Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS). PE was assessed using an 8-item short-form scale

developed by Woodfin et al. WLB was measured using Hayman's 15-item scale

- **Procedure:** The questionnaire was administered to eligible educators, and responses were collected voluntarily. The data were screened for completeness and response quality.
- **Data Analysis:** The data were then analysed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4.1.15 to assess the measurement model and to test the proposed structural relationships and the hypotheses.

3. Results

To ensure the appropriateness of a measurement model, reliability and validity testing must be conducted before proceeding with the PLS-SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2011). This can be done by evaluating three established parameters: 'Outer loadings', 'Composite Reliability' (CR), and 'Average Variance Extracted' (AVE), all of which are satisfied in this study. The next stage is to analyse the discriminant validity of the constructs. The HTMT ratio (Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio) and Fornell-Larcker Criterion were used in the study to assess discriminant validity and were found satisfactory. The model fit was evaluated using SRMR and NFI. The SRMR value is 0.061, and the NFI is 0.736, indicating an appropriate model fit. The research model is shown in Figure 1.

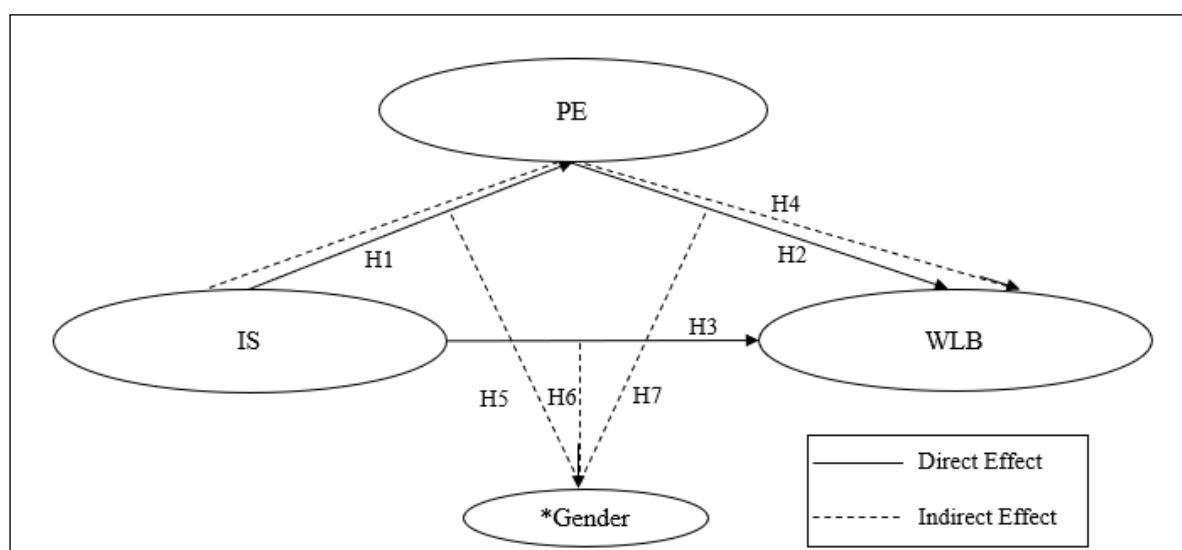


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study

**Gender indicates the categorical variable considered in this study for MGA.*

The structural model was analysed through the coefficient of determination (R^2), path coefficients (β), and p-values, and is given in Table 1. IS negatively influences WLB, and the R^2 value obtained is 0.549, which means 54.9% of the variance in WLB is collectively explained by both the IS and PE. IS positively influences the PE with an R^2 value of 0.492. It means 49.2% variance in perfectionism is explained by impostor syndrome.

Table 1: Hypothesis testing using Structural Equation Modelling

Path	β Value	P Value	Hypothesis	Decision
IS-> PE	0.702	0.000*	H1	Supported
PE-> WLB	-0.301	0.000*	H2	Supported
IS-> WLB	-0.498	0.000*	H3	Supported
IS -> PE -> WLB	-0.211	0.000*	H4	Supported

Significance level: * $p < 0.05$

Multigroup analysis (MGA) is used in partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), to test for meaningful differences between the structural paths of multiple groups (Matthews, 2018). It is usually applied when researchers want to examine differences between categorical variables (e.g., gender or countries) or continuous

variables that can be dichotomized or clustered (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In this study, MGA is performed to know the difference in structural paths across two gender groups, “Male & Female”. The detailed analysis is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Multi-Group Analysis

Relationships	Difference (Male- Female)	P value	Hypotheses	Decision
IS -> PE	0.032	0.386*	H5	Not supported
IS -> WLB	0.163	0.129*	H6	Not supported
PE-> WLB	-0.187	0.121*	H7	Not supported

Source: Smart PLS version 4.1.15. Significance level: * $p < 0.05$

4. Discussion

Grounded in the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theory, the findings of this study offer several actionable implications for institutional leaders. The results indicate that IS functions as a personal psychological demand that indirectly undermines WLB through PE. To deal with these, institutional interventions should focus on the following;

First, in the era of rapid transitions, it is high time that higher education institutions acknowledge IS as a legitimate psychological challenge rather than a personal weakness. Faculty development programs need to include

sessions to address self-doubt, fear of failure, and academic pressures, rather than focusing solely on skill-building. Accelerated upskilling initiatives should be accompanied by realistic performance expectations and supportive leadership practices. Despite demonstrated competence, early-career educators frequently struggle with a lack of confidence, increasing the likelihood of impostor feelings and perfectionistic work behaviours. Strong mentorship programs, peer-support groups, consistent developmental feedback, and structured onboarding processes help them to

build confidence, overcome IS, and reduce reliance on perfectionistic coping.

Second, the negative impact on WLB underscores the importance of promoting boundary-respecting work practices, flexible scheduling, and realistic workload planning. Finally, the contemporary changes in family structures and work expectations have blurred traditional gender roles, increasing psychological and caregiving demands across all genders. Consequently, IS and perfectionistic tendencies are no longer confined to specific gender groups. Institutions should therefore design inclusive WLB policies that accommodate diverse life roles and responsibilities of all gender groups.

The study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases. Future research could use behavioural or predictive approaches to reduce these biases and better capture results in a wider population. Additionally, this study was conducted using fewer variables with a targeted group. A wider study by making use of more individual and contextual factors needs to be conducted to get a clear view

5. Conclusion

In recent years, IS and its ramifications have garnered significant interest among researchers. Numerous papers examine the adverse effects of IS on psychological well-being; however, a comprehensive study examining its impact on WLB, particularly among early-career higher education educators, remains relatively novel. The study explicitly delineated the impact of IS and PE on the WLB of early-career higher education educators. Furthermore, the MGA analysis enables a thorough understanding that the impact on WLB is uniform across the gender groups. Fostering educator well-being cannot be viewed merely as an employee-support initiative but as an integral component of institutional responsibility for advancing inclusive higher education. Creating psychologically supportive, equitable, and sustainable working environments for educators can strengthen their capacity to engage meaningfully with diverse learners and contribute to the long-term development of inclusive educational practices.

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7. Author Declaration

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