Chinese international students' perceptions of personal tutoring – are we hitting the mark?

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> ‘ Personal tutors' characters are different, and then value they provide could be various. It is a good beginning to set 'personal tutor', but in my opinion, their roles are to be clarified and improved to deliver more value to international students. I should say, personal tutor is the part should be invested more to improve student experience.
>
> (Open comments, student survey)

1. Introduction

This research seeks to understand Chinese international students' perceptions of the role of Personal Tutor. Tutors have considerable potential to enhance international students' experience of study abroad. Chinese students' needs may also be particularly complex, given the transition they have to make from their home, social and academic culture to one that may be alien to them. However, there is currently a lack of information on how Chinese students perceive and respond to personal tutoring and the factors that influence this. This study contributes to closing this gap.

We describe the perceptions of staff and students as communicated to us and pick out salient themes. In comparing differing views, we hope to clarify differences and similarities between them, leading to a better understanding of where and why there may be misalignment between expectations and behaviours of tutors and tutees. Finally, we draw conclusions based on evidence and with some level of confidence make recommendations of helpful ways to proceed.

2. Research aim

The aim is to explore Chinese students' and UK tutors' perceptions of the role of the personal tutor, and gain insight into potential barriers to student engagement.

3. Motivations for research

The study was carried out with a view to exploring the issues and generating insights in order to create new knowledge and a grounding for further exploration, as well as practical recommendations.

4. Summary of research outcomes

The findings indicate that there are differences in expectations and perceptions of the personal tutor's role between staff and students. However, both groups appear to have an ill-defined idea of the role, although staff have clearer views than students. Very few positive comments on the role emerged compared with the number of negative comments, which confirms the study's starting point that personal tutoring is not working optimally for international students. Students have a pragmatic, results-focussed orientation, regard the tutor as a resource, and wish for more focussed, directive and practical support, while tutors have a

developmental orientation and would like students to become more autonomous and proactive.

5. Background information

UK HEIs increasingly see international students, and particularly Chinese students, as an important source of economic and cultural capital at a time when home student numbers are in decline for demographic reasons. Chinese students outnumber those from any other country, have shown a 14% rise over the last six years, reaching 95,090 in 2016-17 (HESA data accessed on UKCISA website, 2018) and are predicted to reach 130,900 in 2020 (Ianelli and Huang, 2014).

There is evidence that Chinese students do not achieve as highly as home students (Iannelli and Huang, 2013; Crawford and Wang, 2014). Their wellbeing may also suffer as a result. Bentley's (2017) research found that international students are less likely to make use of wellbeing and mental health services, despite the fact they suffer from poorer mental health than home students (Nicolas et al., 2013; Raunic & Xenos, 2008). This suggests a reticence to make use of university services or a lack of awareness of their entitlement. Personal tutors act as an important conduit to central university services, such as counselling. Recent research suggests that some international students feel dissatisfied with the level of support offered by personal tutors (Bentley, 2017), which indicates some misalignment of expectations. Personal experience, reports from staff and tutoring records from the researcher's institution indicate that levels of engagement by Chinese students with their tutors is low.

6. Research methodology
6.1 Methodology

Situated in an interpretivist paradigm, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of participants and a mixed methods approach was taken (interviews, focus groups, and an online survey, which centred on metaphors being rated for appropriateness).

The research team consisted of a British principle investigator, a Mandarin-speaking co-researcher and a Mandarin-speaking research assistant. Chinese student participants could express themselves in Chinese to remove a potential barrier to communication.

The conceptual framework used metaphor as the central heuristic device for gaining in-depth insights into the perceptions of the tutor's role. Metaphor is a means of communicating and exploring meaning found across human cultures. Clearly, there are culturally specific variations in interpretation (Wang 2011), which were taken into consideration in the design of the study. A similar method was used by Jin and Cortazzi (2013) to gain insight into Chinese students' perceptions of teachers. The choice of metaphors was based on suggestions from colleagues, including Chinese colleagues, and the literature, eg Mackinnon (2004). Metaphors were presented with a picture and gloss, and the students' survey had Chinese translations where students were asked to rate how accurately the metaphors 'captured the essence of the role of personal tutor' (see appendix 1).

6.2 Data collection
Ethical approval for this study was granted from the researchers' institution.

An anonymous online survey (See appendix 1), in English (with Mandarin translation for the student survey) was sent to 434 undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Plymouth Business School (PBS) of mainland Chinese origin. A parallel staff survey was sent to all PBS personal tutors (N=101).

In addition, an identical survey was sent to 200 pre-sessional students and 412 undergraduates at two other UK institutions. In total 127 completed responses (Nstudent = 95, Nstaff = 32) were collected with an overall response rate of 11.1%.

A survey was also sent to students at a Chinese public university. The small sample (N=24) means that the results cannot be considered representative, but are used for illustrative purposes only. We carried out two semi-structured focus groups in Chinese (40 minutes each), with three postgraduate and four undergraduate PBS students. A selection of staff (seven British and four Chinese lecturers) were also interviewed individually (less than one hour).

7. Key research findings
7.1 Quantitative analysis
7.1.1 Survey results - metaphor
Table 1 gives the mean scores of the rating of the metaphors by groups, with highest and lowest scores indicated. Students from the Chinese institution are included as there are interesting differences in their scores from the other two groups.
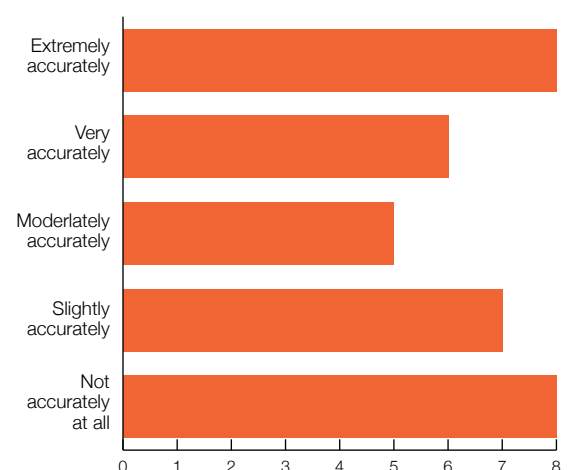
Table 1. Rating of metaphors

Metaphor	Staff N=32	Students (UK) N=95	Students (China) N=24	Diff between groups
Spring	1.19	1.71	2.48	1.3
Tree	1.22	1.65	2.31	1.1
Gas station	1.22	1.87	2.88	1.7
Line manager	1.31	2.17	2.23	.90
Bench	1.41	1.79	2.60	1.2
Broker	1.53	1.95	2.27	.74
Doctor	1.84	1.94	1.96	.12
Sage	1.91	2.18	2.04	.13
Parent	1.97	2.25	2.50	.53
Fiduciary	2.03	2.11	2.46	.43
Counsellor	2.13	2.22	2.58	.45
Older sibling	2.13	2.44	2.58	.45
Friend	2.13	2.38	2.69	.53
Coach	2.34	2.55	2.48	.22
Mountain guide	2.41	2.34	2.58	.17
Mentor	2.78	2.46	2.58	.32
Range	1.59	.90	.92	

Overall, there was quite a high level of agreement in the rating of metaphors, and a tendency towards the mean. However, staff ratings of metaphors differed from students' in several respects. Firstly, the range of scores given was wider: from 2.78 to 1.19, a range of 1.59; whereas students had a range of 0.92 and 0.90.

There was more variance between individual members of staff, shown by the standard deviation, the largest being that for Parent (1.527), where views were quite polarized (see figure 1) and the smallest being for Mentor (0.820), a difference of 0.707 as contrasted with the largest for students being for Bench (1.306) and the smallest for Mountain guide (1.051), a difference of 0.255. However, the difference in sample sizes means no firm conclusions can be drawn.
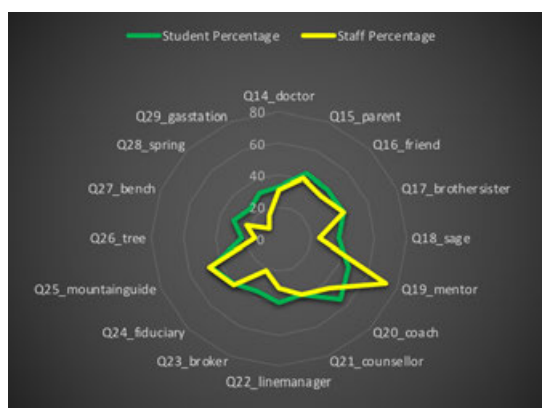
Fig 1. Staff survey results for parent

This suggests that staff have more varied and stronger views about most and least preferred metaphors. There is a notable difference between staff and China-based students. Students in the UK are more in line with staff in terms of their preference for metaphors and Mentor, Coach and Mountain guide were rated highly by both staff and students. However, there are still differences as can be seen in the diagrams below.

We compared the number of *'extremely accurately'* or *'very accurately'* ratings for each metaphor for staff and students in the UK.
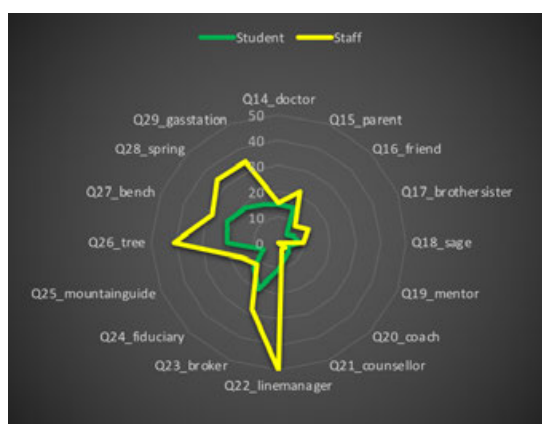
Fig 2.   Percentage of students and staff rating *'extremely accurately'* or *'very accurately'*

The same was done for the rating of both groups for *'not at all accurately'*.

It is apparent that staff have clearer views about most and least preferred metaphors.

Fig 3.   Percentage of students and staff rating *'not at all accurately'*

7.1.2 Characteristics and qualities of personal tutors

Students and staff rated a list of characteristics and qualities of tutors from *'Extremely important' (5)* to *'Not at all important' (1)*. Most characteristics were considered important, with a mean rating of between 3.6 and 4.5 for students and 2.5 and 4.5

for staff. Again, this shows that staff have more differentiated views. Student level of agreement is higher than that of staff, as shown by the smaller standard deviation (see appendix 2).

Staff and students were asked to choose the single most important characteristic of all, and in Figure 4 we can see a clear difference in preference with students having a rather more pragmatic view of what is important in a personal tutor. Chinese staff confirmed that students would not expect or wish to be listened to, but rather informed and directed.

There were no meaningful correlations between important characteristics and metaphor choice for either staff or students.

See figure 4, 'Single most important characteristic of tutor'.

7.2 Qualitative analysis
7.2.1 Method
Qualitative data was analysed using NVivo (a qualitative data analysis computer software package) to see what major and minor themes emerged. Open comments from the surveys were also coded in NVivo. The researchers then examined the relative salience of themes between students and staff.

Four Chinese and seven non-Chinese tutors were interviewed. The student focus groups were conducted in Chinese, transcribed, translated and coded. Students were asked a series of open questions and invited to categorise the metaphors from the survey.

7.2.2 Metaphors chosen
7.2.2.1 Metaphors chosen by staff
In the interviews, staff selected a metaphor which represented the role of a tutor and said why (see Appendix 3). The most favourable metaphors staff mentioned were: Mentor (3), Coach (2), Friend (2). Metaphors that staff mentioned as unsuitable were: *parents, sibling, doctor, sage, friend*. This suggests on the whole that UK staff expect the role to be boundaried and the tutee to take a proactive role.

Staff survey respondents made 20 suggestions for metaphors, and the categories of *Guide, Signposting* and *Support* stood out as salient. *Sounding board, safety net, Siri/Cortana - a personal assistant who can signpost you to the information you need* and *111 operator* were also suggested. One member of staff, evidently struck by the multiplicity of the role, suggested a *mixed metaphor*!

7.2.2.2 Metaphors chosen by students
Postgraduate students' suggestions of metaphor for the ideal tutor were: *mountain guide, line*

manager and consultant. They expressed a desire for someone who was proactive and directive in helping them make progress. They divided the metaphors for tutors on the basis of relationships, how close these were and what they could get from them. They valued the qualifications of the tutor, and preferred someone with experience. They had not had contact with their allocated tutor.

The four undergraduates were somewhat similar, suggesting *gas station, compass, psychologist and big brother*, again giving reasons that indicated a wish for concern and guidance. However, they would not apply these metaphors to their current tutor, who they felt did not measure up to the ideal.

In the survey, students made 100 suggestions, most of which can be categorised into three main areas: *academic* (words like *teacher, instructor, supervisor*); *affective* (words such as *friend, friendly, love, soulmate, guardian*); *guidance* (*guide, advisor, beacon, light*). Some suggested dissatisfaction: *stranger; useless pretend to care for students*. There were a range of interesting metaphors which defied categorisation: *rain in spring* and *wind in summer*; *like chicken breast*, t*asted not delicious while it is really healthy* and a few which sat alone: *mirror; agent, babysitter*.

> **For both staff and students 'Guide' was the largest category**
>
> Terms used by staff suggested a professional, boundaried role: *Someone to support and guide you in all aspects of your academic journey*.
>
> For students it was a more emotionally attached role: *when you are lost in life path, he/she can show you the way.*
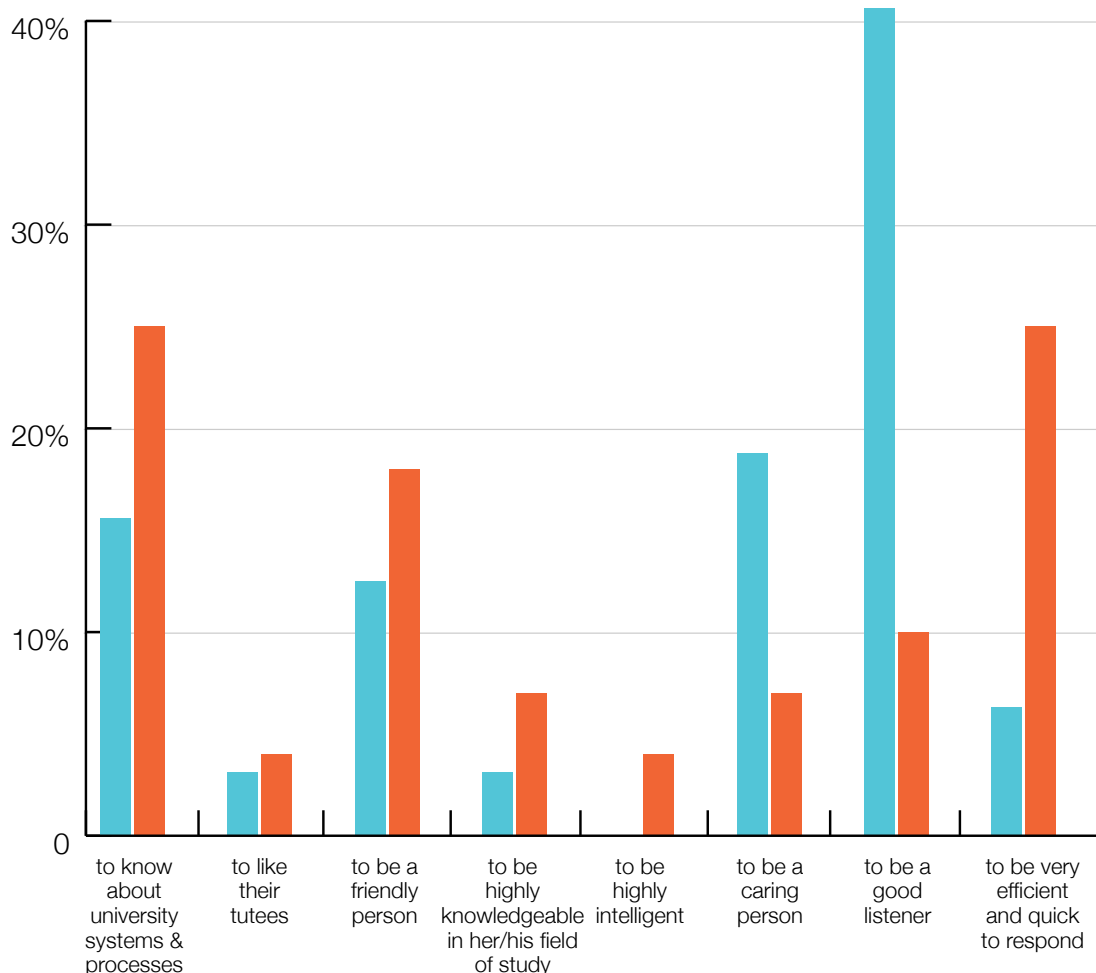
7.2.3 Views of tutorials
7.2.3.1 Staff
Most staff complained about lack of attendance at tutorials and lack of engagement when students did come. The Chinese tutors said that the students had no idea of the purpose of personal tutorials. Tutors found students generally reticent to speak, either due to shyness, language difficulties or unwillingness to admit to having problems. They also reported that students were not proactive in asking for a meeting and did not take up the support and opportunities signposted. Generally, Chinese students were perceived as reluctant to integrate with other nationalities and cultures.

The three female Chinese tutors said they had a clear agenda which explained their tutorial sessions.

Most tutors felt the only use the students perceived in the tutor was to provide references for further study.

Fig 4.   Single most important characteristic of tutor

7.2.3.2   Students

None of the postgraduate students had seen their personal tutor for a one-to-one meeting. They said the tutor was too busy and that they did not need his/her help, as they felt they had not encountered any particular problems. This contrasted with their views of the ideal tutor, who would give advice, help them through difficult patches and point them in the right direction. The female undergraduates felt they had some benefits from the relationship but one student had never met his personal tutor. He stressed the importance of getting a reference letter, the only function of the personal tutor from his point of view, although, ideally, he wanted academic help from a personal tutor. One student mentioned character and emotional intelligence as important qualities. Another was concerned about the ability, ideas and age of the personal tutor. One sought practical answers and guidance.

7.2.4 Cultural differences

Cultural differences were mentioned by UK lecturers more than Chinese staff but, interestingly, students in the focus groups did not refer to them. Tutors felt differences can pose a barrier to communication and developing a relationship:

> **"But culture is [a barrier], because … when they say one thing I don't know whether that is what they really mean or whether it is a euphemism for something else."**
>
> Male Tutor.

One of the main differences mentioned was conservatism or reticence to share personal issues. This lack of openness was mentioned as a barrier to providing effective and timely support. One tutor had noticed that Chinese students do not declare disabilities, whereas British students would seek support. He also noted that Chinese students do not seem to apply for extenuating circumstances.

7.2.5 Language ability

Language difficulties were mentioned by Chinese staff (two references) and UK staff (15 references). The non-Chinese staff perceived language as a barrier to students' progress and to communication in tutorials. Tutors are concerned that poor English will affect students' studies, and so encourage them to engage in activities to develop their language skills.

Limited time was part of the problem and skill and patience are required to overcome the barriers. This language barrier can affect the relationship:

> **"Some of them would only come in pairs because the one who wanted to see me was too shy to speak or felt that their English was not very good. "**
>
> Female tutor.

The only students who referred to language were the two female undergraduates who had only been in the UK for three months.

7.2.6 The relationships between tutors and tutees

All the tutors said that the relationship varied with the individual student and their level of engagement. However, they felt some generalisations could be made. Time was mentioned by many tutors as an issue that inhibited the development of relationships, and one tutor mentioned that she gave her Chinese tutees more time.

Table 2. Most frequent words by group

Non-Chinese staff N = 21,591 words			Chinese staff N = 9,837 words			Chinese students N = 9,950 words		
Word*	Count	%**	Word	Count	%	Word*	Count	(%)
students	403	3.67	students	229	2.19	students	206	3.84
Chinese	209	1.91	Chinese	108	1.03	tutor	184	3.43
English	133	1.22	time	61	0.58	help	76	1.42
different	102	0.93	need	40	0.38	questions	36	0.67
tutor	92	0.84	help	38	0.36	friend	34	0.63
time	85	0.77	want	38	0.36	university	33	0.62
want	80	0.73	problem	33	0.32	studying	32	0.60
role	75	0.68	system	30	0.29	need	32	0.60
problem	74	0.67	reference	29	0.28	hope	30	0.56
feel	65	0.59	different	29	0.28	life	28	0.52

*Word - includes a variety of forms of the word – eg tutor, tutors, tutoring, tutorial, etc.

**Weighted percentage – the frequency of the word relative to the total words counted.

The male tutors made reference to the fact it was a professional role:

> **"It is fairly standard personal tutoring. I've made myself available."**

Chinese staff seemed to empathise with the students, using words like, share, friend, and need, and two tutors in particular showed a keen interest in the progress of their students and how to support this. One raised the notion of being responsible for her tutees, and in return appreciated their sense of respect. Another considered the relationship to be the basis for being able to support the students effectively.

A number of teachers felt the relationship could not be developed through personal tutorials alone. This is a problem with final year direct entry students where there is a short period of time for the relationship to develop.

From the survey comments (N=16) three main categories emerged:
- challenges of the role;
- the importance of the role;
- student engagement.

Staff felt that the personal tutor role was undervalued by students.

The metaphors students chose (see Appendix 4) indicate a desire for more concern and involvement from the tutor. In the open comments on the survey (N=34), the largest group focussed on students' dissatisfaction with tutoring:

> **"Don't waste time or speak nonsense. Give all the tutorial to something meaningful or related to studies".**

Students also acknowledged the importance of the role and expressed the view that the role of a tutor was to give focussed, practical help.

7.3 Linguistic analysis

Staff and student corpora were created from the data and analysed for word frequency to see if this shed light on the salient issues for each group. The most frequent 100 words in a text were examined. Ambiguous or non-specific words were removed until the list was reduced to 37 significant and core words (see Appendix 5).

Naturally, both 'students' and 'tutor' have a very high count for all groups, but after that the highest for students is 'help' – far more frequent than all other terms; for non-Chinese staff: 'Chinese' 'English' and 'different', and for Chinese staff: 'Chinese' followed by 'time'. A comparison of the top 10 terms for each group indicates differences in concerns: it is clear that the largest overlap is between the two groups of staff and really, given that students and tutors are inevitably common terms, there is no overlap between non-Chinese staff and Chinese students.

See Table 2, the 'Most frequent words by group'.

8. Conclusions and ideas for further research

The findings suggest some degree of misalignment between the views of Chinese students and their UK tutors, both in terms of practical details and underlying orientations.

UK tutors, even those of Chinese origin, may have a less hands-on, directive approach than Chinese students would like, which leads to the students feeling that the tutor is not meeting their needs.

Findings indicate that Chinese students appreciate their tutors taking a vivid interest in their progress, they would like practical and constructive suggestions, particularly on academic matters, in a timely fashion, and that they value a caring attitude.

They are unlikely to be as proactive and independent as UK tutors might expect.

A major limitation is that the small sample makes statistical analyses less reliable and, as it was not a random sample, we make no claim for representativeness. The low response rate for the online survey suggests that the topic did not engage students' interest, which may in itself be significant. A larger number of respondents would have enhanced the richness and reliability of the data. In the thematic analysis, saturation point was not reached.

Analysis of qualitative data is interpretative and as such open to bias. The use of two coders from different backgrounds should have mitigated this danger.

The option of speaking in Chinese facilitated more effective engagement with the concepts and freer expression for both students and staff, and we strongly recommend use of the mother tongue in any future research.

In retrospect, it would have been useful to have had a control group of British students, to see whether they share the same concerns as Chinese students.

In addition to rating the metaphors, survey respondents could be asked to provide a reason for their rating. This would give greater insight into their interpretation of the metaphor.

This study does not claim to be anything other than exploratory and further ideas for understanding international students' views of, and engagement with, personal tutoring in UKHEIs is strongly recommended, including carrying out a large survey in the People's Republic of China to explore the Chinese context.

9.   Recommendations

Based on the findings, a number of recommendations for improving student engagement with personal tutors emerge:

- Explain the personal tutoring system in terms the students will understand. This may require support from Chinese colleagues.
- Provide a framework for tutoring and a structure to tutorial meetings. If students can understand exactly what they are being offered and why, there is a greater chance of them engaging.
- Be aware of the precise needs of the students. Final year direct entry students in particular are under tremendous pressure to meet their academic targets and cannot spend time on anything other than essential issues. Identify

what these are. This may require liaison with module leaders and programme leaders.
- Focus the tutorial meetings on students' expressed needs and on practical, tangible outcomes, related to academic targets.
- Target language support at the students' specific needs. For final year students, this may be in the area of dissertation writing.
- Advice and guidance must be timely. This means that tutors must respond to requests for information and assistance promptly, and tutorials should be scheduled at times when the information or skills development offered is most relevant.
- Provide cultural briefings for tutors working with Chinese students. Again, support from Chinese colleagues or colleagues specialising in intercultural communication may be helpful.
- Match tutors with students they teach wherever possible.
- Allocate sufficient time for tutoring. Chinese tutees may require more time than a home student would.

Lastly, is a recommendation to care about the progress and wellbeing of Chinese students and to try to understand them. Far from home, they are engaging in challenging studies in a foreign language and culture. Our findings suggest that they appreciate an engaged and directive approach.

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11. Acknowledgements

12. Further information

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