"Alexa, Where's my Timetable?" Chinese Students' Perceptions of the Personal Tutoring Role

Alison Raby
Senior Lecturer/Programme Leader
Department of Languages
Lincoln International Business School

Report

This reflective piece briefly explores Chinese students' perceptions of their personal tutors at university drawing on a sample of literature around personal tutoring and international students. Differences are drawn out between students' and tutors' views of the role according to experience and research studies. It is noted that many Chinese students tend to view the student-tutor relationship as transactional, whereas tutors are often more interested in listening and forming a relationship. The short notice argues that if Chinese students can view their tutors as more than just an information source it could enhance their sense of belonging and possibly their experience as a student.

"Can you give me information about applying for leave?" and "My timetable has two sessions at the same time, what should I do?" These exemplify typical interactions I have with my Chinese personal tutees via email throughout the academic year. Some I have not met face to face, and some will approach me for a reference at the end of their studies. This causes me to question why they are not responding to calls for contact, and what may be done about this.   On the other hand, there are a few that will ask for help with their studies and take advantage of the support that is on offer. These are a minority in comparison with those who seem to require quick answers to the issues they may encounter.

Wootton (2006) has described the personal tutor as a 'conduit' (p.118), directing tutees to various services for support. This could be seen as a similar function to that of an electronic personal assistant, which quickly answers questions and directs the enquirer to further sources. Although this may be a valid function for a personal tutor, the relationship of tutor and tutee has potential to be much more important. Several researchers have argued that this relationship is crucial, including Laurillard (2002), who states that student and tutor dialogue is essential for effective learning. Similarly, Chickering and Gamson (1987) state that this contact is important for student motivation and participation. Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) discuss

the essential nature of the role of social support for first-year students, and Thomas (2012, p.1) states that:

> *It is the human side of education which comes first – finding friends, feeling confident and above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution – that is the necessary starting point for student success.*

The role of the personal tutor therefore could contribute to a student feeling a sense of belonging.

It is tempting for students to view the personal tutor as someone they go to only when they have a problem. Laycock (2009) states that a number of universities are now identifying that this deficit model of tutoring is not appropriate given the widening participation agenda in higher education. Indeed, some universities are changing the titles of their personal tutors, including Coventry, which uses the term 'progression coach'. The role of the personal tutor therefore seems to require further definition, and Walker (2018) suggests that this definition should view the personal tutor and tutee as partners.

Lowes carried out research on behalf of UKCISA (2018) to discover personal tutors' and Chinese students' perceptions of the personal tutor role. 127 staff and student responses were gained from an online survey in the UK and 24 from students in China. Focus groups and interviews were also carried out in China. In this study (translated into Chinese for the Chinese students), Chinese students and their tutors were asked to identify the role of the personal tutor using a number of metaphors, for example, mountain guide, line manager, friend and 'gas station'. Students and tutors were also asked to identify the single most important characteristic a personal tutor should possess.   This revealed a number of differences between the tutors' perceptions of their role and those of the students. For example, the students' preferred metaphors were line manager, consultant, compass and psychologist, whereas tutors' were mentor, coach and friend. The preferred characteristics were also different, for example, staff valued listening skills whereas students valued the tutor having knowledge about the university's systems and responding quickly to emails. This indicates that Chinese students prefer to have someone who can give them the correct information quickly, while tutors strive to foster deeper relationships. Perhaps if students could view the personal tutor as more than a source of information, this would help contribute to their sense of belonging and student experience. How this could be done warrants extensive investigation, and is something that could be explored further.

Zhan (2018) asserts that it is necessary for tutors of Chinese students to understand their sophisticated social and cultural values in order to be effective. She suggests that that tutors need to integrate values of social culture along with students' individual values in their goal setting, and should help students to outline which skills they need to achieve their learning goals. Wheeler and Birtle (1993) suggest that tutors should be sensitive to the needs of students from different cultures, as these students are adjusting to a new style of education and life, and may require extra attention. This indicates that tutors should be culturally aware in order to help students engage with goals. Further exploration would be useful to identify types of activities tutors could use with students in order to help them engage with the personal tutor and achieve their potential.

In a study carried out by Lochtie (2016), international students interviewed stated that they would like tutors to be willing to go the extra mile in their support to help them overcome culture shock and adapt to a new environment. Typically, international students see a tutor as a person in authority and maintain a respectful distance (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993). This could have an effect on the extent to which the student feels confident in expressing their views or asking for help (Welikala and Watkins, 2008). McDonald (2014) affirms this, in finding that international students were reluctant to speak to an academic, and may therefore not access important support. This could mean that tutors of Chinese students need to be more proactive than they would be with home students.

Bingham and Grey (2019) have explored a Universal Design for Personal Tutoring, which includes 'regular, structured, developmental, one-to-one meetings, in which the student is encouraged to plan and focus on their future development'. Having structured meetings may help to enhance Chinese students' perceptions of the purpose of personal tutorials, particularly if the design could be adapted to include cultural and individual values of the students.

With a little planning and insight, perhaps we could change the questions from "Where's my timetable?" to something more like "Can you help me plan my goals?", thus enhancing Chinese students' experience of the personal tutoring system, relationship and ultimately their success at university.

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