



Understanding the Ineffective Transplant of the Personal Tutor System at the Sino-Foreign University

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Abstract. This study takes one of the earliest Sino-foreign universities in China as an example to investigate why the Personal Tutor System (PTS), transplanted from the British higher education context to the Chinese context, functions below expectations despite its intended role in supporting students' academic and personal development. Most recent existing research simply attributes the system's underperformance to Chinese students' cultural backgrounds and low motivation to seek teachers' help. However, little attention has been paid to tutors' perceptions or the Chinese institutional environment in which the system operates. Using a qualitative approach, this study conducts semi-structured interviews with a group of students and tutors to compare their expectations, understandings, and experiences of the PTS. Three key problems undermining the system's effectiveness emerged: 1. Unclear definition of roles; 2. Mismatch between tutors' academic backgrounds and students' actual needs; 3. Absence of compulsory attendance requirements. All these results show that the PTS at this university has only been transplanted in a procedural manner, operating with low efficiency and poor quality. Hence, the study provides some advice to reform this system, including clearer role communication, implementing a bidirectional tutor–student matching system, and enforcing evaluation mechanisms.

Keywords: Personal Tutor System, Sino-foreign University, Systemic Conflict

1 Introduction

Since the late 1980s, Sino-foreign cooperative education has emerged as a key model of international academic collaboration, offering Chinese students more diverse educational choices and facilitating the exchange of global educational resources. A landmark in this development was the establishment of China's first Sino-foreign university in 2004—which symbolized a new phase in the localization of international higher education models. [1] As the direct branch campus of its parent institution in the United Kingdom, this university not only shares educational resources with its UK counterpart but has also largely transplanted the British university system into the Chinese context. However, as these partnerships deepen, teaching-related challenges arising from cultural differences have increasingly come to the fore.

Among these transplanted elements, the Personal Tutor System—a distinctive feature of British higher education[2]—has also been introduced. The Personal Tutor System (PTS) is designed to help students navigate academic life by fostering supportive relationships with academic staff who offer guidance on both academic matters and future career planning [3][4]. Its primary purpose is to ease students' adaptation to university culture by clarifying institutional expectations while also providing personal support [5]. As an important component of student support services in the British university system, this system was directly replicated from the UK campus to the Chinese campus. However, in practice, it has failed to function as effectively as intended among Chinese staff and students, resulting in issues such as low utilization rates and inefficiency.

2 Literature Review

Existing studies predominantly focus on students as the primary research subjects, emphasizing student-level adaptation challenges such as low help-seeking motivation, differences in learning styles, and the influence of Confucian values that promote deference to authority. It is argued that Chinese students, having undergone 18 years of exam-oriented education, have been conditioned to demonstrate unconditional trust in and obedience to what teachers deliver in class. As a result, they tend to lack the initiative to seek help and are more accustomed to passive and rigid learning behaviors [6]. Moreover, under the influence of Confucian cultural norms, students—lacking a locally equivalent reference point—tend to interpret the personal tutor role as that of a “class advisor” or a regular subject teacher. This misunderstanding makes it difficult for them to engage in meaningful personal dialogue or equal academic conversations [7].

As noted above, most current studies attribute the difficulties in implementing the Personal Tutor System to students, seeking solutions and breakthroughs solely from the student perspective. However, it is undeniable that the Personal Tutor System is a two-way communication and interaction process within the university framework. Therefore, the role and influence of tutors, as well as the university itself, in this process should not be underestimated. This study aims to fill this gap by comparing students' perspectives with those of tutors to identify the exact source of the problem, ultimately proposing contextually grounded recommendations for institutional improvement in China.

3 Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using interviews as the primary method of data collection. By interviewing both tutors and students about their definitions, understandings, past experiences, self-assessments, and perceived challenges regarding the Personal Tutor System, the study seeks to reveal the nuanced differences between tutors and students in their perceptions and experiences of the PTS within the context of Chinese universities. The study develops a set of interview questions to both capture information about the official, institution-led aspects of the system's operation

(e.g., training and structural support) and encourage respondents to reflect on their own experiences and perspectives—such as specific cases or challenges—with the aim of exploring in depth the functional positioning and practical operation of the Personal Tutor System within both Chinese and British cultural contexts. Interviews were conducted with students first, followed by tutors, based on issues raised in the student interviews. A comparative analysis of both groups’ responses was then undertaken to identify the underlying causes of the challenges inherent in the implementation of the Personal Tutor System. By ensuring that both sides addressed the same core topics, this sequential approach enhanced the validity and consistency of the findings.

The study targets personal tutors currently or previously serving at the Chinese campus and students currently studying there. For tutors, purposive sampling was used to recruit 3 participants with at least one year of experience in the personal tutor role to ensure familiarity with the responsibilities and challenges associated with the system. For student participants, the study adopted a random sampling method, interviewing 17 students to ensure that the identified issues are generally representative rather than exceptional. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees before data collection began.

Table 1. Students’ Meetings with Personal Tutors.

Students	Grade	Attendance	Whether meetings with personal tutor yourself
1	Y3	3	√
2	Y2	3	
3	Y2	4	
4	Y2	2	
5	Y3	2	
6	Y3	3	
7	Y3	4	
8	Y4	3	
9	Y2	3	
10	Y4	4	
11	Y4	3	
12	Y3	3	
13	Y4	8	√

14	Y4	3	
15	Y3	1	
16	Y4	2	
17	Y4	5	√

Table 2. Information of Interviewed Personal Tutors.

Tutors	Period of responsibility	Major
A	2 years	IC
B	1 year	IC
C	4 years	Journalism

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, depending on the geographical location and preference of participants. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant’s permission to ensure accuracy in data transcription and analysis. Notes were also taken during the interviews to capture immediate impressions and contextual details.

4 The Lack of Clear Role Definition in the Personal Tutor System

Interviews were conducted with 17 students from different academic years, ranging from Year 1 to Year 4. As shown in Table 1, students generally hold misconceptions about the Personal Tutor System and demonstrate limited meaningful engagement with it. Almost all participants reported that the university had never provided a clear or systematic explanation of the concept of the Personal Tutor System, the types of issues it covers, or how it differs from other support mechanisms such as counsellors. “During each meeting, my tutor only asked me if I had any questions—no one has ever explained which specific areas the Personal Tutor System is actually responsible for. The university has never held any official briefing about it, so apart from academic matters, I have no idea what else my tutor is supposed to help with. Most of the meetings followed the same routine: ‘Do you have any problems recently?’ — ‘No.’ ‘How are you doing?’ — ‘Good.’ Then it ended,” said a Year 3 student. Consequently, students’ understanding of the personal tutor’s role appeared narrow and utilitarian; more than half of the respondents believed that tutors were responsible only for academic-related matters, such as coursework guidance or exam preparation.

In addition to the absence of an official institutional briefing, students' confusion about the scope of the Personal Tutor System also stems from its conflict with the existing counsellor system in Chinese local universities. Students often struggle to distinguish the boundaries between the responsibilities of personal tutors and counsellors, which in turn reduces the overall efficiency and effectiveness of both systems. As Trowler and Cooper [8] point out, when institutional roles and expectations are not clearly defined, both staff and students tend to rely on informal interpretations and self-guided exploration, leading to inconsistent experiences and reduced effectiveness. In the case of this university, without a clear and consistent institutional introduction, students—shaped by repeated unsatisfactory experiences—gradually came to describe their meetings with tutors as merely “a task to check off” or “an opportunity to practice spoken English.” This indicates that the system's original mentoring purpose has been significantly weakened at both the cultural and institutional levels.

Tutors similarly identified the lack of clear role definition as a major problem. Apart from the university's general explanatory document available on the official website, tutors' understanding of their own responsibilities largely depends on personal interpretation. New personal tutors (PTs) receive little to no practical training and begin their roles with minimal knowledge of their duties or expected practices. As one tutor quoted in Table 2 admitted, “I learned on the job; no one ever clearly told me what I was supposed to be responsible for. When I first started, the university only showed me a generic video. I even forgot to send an email to one of my students, and we didn't realize it until the end of the semester when the student contacted the school office.” The lack of institutional training and guidance forces tutors to interpret their roles individually, resulting in inconsistencies in the support provided. This finding echoes Leese's [9] argument that an effective tutoring system requires institutional support, clearly defined role boundaries, and professional development opportunities for tutors. The university's absence of professional support and formal training also reflects, to some extent, its procedural approach to the Personal Tutor System, which in turn contributes to its overall inefficiency.

Furthermore, in addition to the ineffectiveness of training, a Chinese tutor also pointed out the issue of overlapping responsibilities between the Personal Tutor System and the Chinese counsellor system (*fudaoyuan*), which traditionally handles students' personal, emotional, and administrative matters. She remarked, “As a Chinese university, there already exists a well-established counselling and management system aligned with the national higher education context, so the personal tutor role feels redundant or vaguely defined. And since counsellors can communicate with students in Chinese, while we can only use English, most students actually prefer to talk to their counsellors.” This observation aligns with Marginson's [10] theory of “policy borrowing,” which warns that the direct transplantation of Western educational models into different cultural contexts often results in “structural dissonance” due to misaligned institutional logics. As for the remaining two international tutors, they were completely unaware of the existence of the counsellor system, further highlighting the confusion and inefficiency in the operation of these two systems within the university.

5 Mismatch in Academic Discipline and Level

Beyond the lack of clarity regarding the personal tutor's actual responsibilities, the mismatch between students and tutors in terms of academic discipline and level is another issue highlighted by both students and teachers. Three-quarters of the interviewed students expressed dissatisfaction with the tutor allocation system, noting that tutors were generally assigned based on broad school divisions rather than specific programs or academic levels. As a result, a student majoring in International Communications might be assigned a tutor from Journalism, or a first-year undergraduate student might be paired with a tutor from the postgraduate faculty. "My tutor was from the postgraduate faculty and therefore could hardly offer any practical help with my undergraduate studies. Although we were both within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, she was unable to answer many of my questions related to the International Communications major. We study in completely different fields. Additionally, the requirements for undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations differ significantly, which meant that even on general issues such as formatting, my tutor could provide little useful guidance," noted a Year 2 student. Most students agreed that this cross-disciplinary and cross-level mismatch makes it difficult for tutors to provide subject-specific academic guidance, thereby diminishing students' motivation to engage. "I always find it really unfair—one of my friends' personal tutor is one of our lecturers this semester, so he can also book a meeting with the professor outside her office hours. Compared to my personal tutor from the Language Center, this is really helpful," said a Year 4 student. This finding supports Montgomery's [11] argument that cultural and disciplinary proximity plays a crucial role in effective academic mentoring, particularly within international or transnational educational institutions. Throughout the interviews, it became evident that being matched with an appropriate tutor made a significant difference in students' overall experience.

Tutors also pointed out that the system lacks formal follow-up or monitoring mechanisms. For tutors, such mismatched pairings limit the effectiveness of communication and practical support between tutors and students. Tutors noted that this degree of "random allocation" often forces them to provide only general responses when faced with students' academic questions, undermining the trust necessary for effective mentoring and severing potential meaningful connections. One tutor mentioned, "I am not even familiar with my students' majors, which makes it really hard for me to proactively ask them questions or offer them concrete help. This gap makes it even more difficult for us to communicate closely. It is unrealistic to expect them to talk about their daily problems."

6 Lack of Compulsory Attendance

Last but not least, students highlighted the issue of attendance. Student participation was further reduced by the absence of institutionally mandated meeting obligations. As students gradually realized that there were no consequences for missing meetings, the lack of institutional enforcement led the Personal Tutor System to become a symbolic

and optional mechanism rather than a genuine source of academic and personal support. “I haven’t attended a meeting for an entire academic year. Last semester, I forgot to go to the tutor’s meeting, but nothing happened, so I decided not to attend anymore. I find it really meaningless,” said one student. Another student also noted, “I found that the timing and frequency of meetings with personal tutors varied greatly among students. For example, I usually had two meetings each semester, while my friend only had one throughout the entire year. So I guess the university does not actually have any strict requirements for these meetings, so whether students attend them or not seems to mean nothing.”

7 Conclusion and Recommendations

From the above analysis, it is clear that the ineffectiveness of the Personal Tutor System at the Chinese campus can largely be attributed to the university’s planning shortcomings in transplanting this system from the UK educational context to China. The institution did not carefully consider how to integrate the system with China’s already well-established counsellor framework, but instead implemented it in a simplistic and appropriate manner.

Firstly, the university lacks clear communication and procedural transparency regarding the Personal Tutor System for both staff and students. Neither tutors nor students have received formal and consistent explanations about the system’s purpose, responsibilities, or processes. Only a brief, inconspicuous introduction on the official website and an outdated video are provided, leaving both tutors and students to navigate the system independently. As a result, the system’s three primary objectives—academic development, personal support, and fostering a sense of belonging within the university community—have been diluted into a formalistic, procedural exercise, gradually becoming ineffective during once-a-year, two-minute meetings. In light of this, the study recommends establishing institutionalized induction training for tutors as well as formal briefing sessions for students. Tutors should receive systematic guidance prior to assuming their roles and participate in regular training to enhance their mentoring skills and share best practices. Meanwhile, first-year students should attend formal Personal Tutor System orientation sessions to clarify tutors’ responsibilities, functions, and communication channels. Additionally, implementing feedback or monitoring mechanisms would help ensure the system is effectively implemented.

Secondly, the mismatch between tutors and students fundamentally limits the PTS’s effectiveness. Because tutors often lack the disciplinary expertise or contextual knowledge to provide relevant guidance, students perceive meetings as unhelpful or irrelevant. This not only undermines the system’s legitimacy but also reinforces students’ disengagement. Theoretically, this aligns with Wenger’s [12] community of practice framework, which emphasizes that effective mentorship depends on shared context and mutual engagement. Without disciplinary proximity, the tutor–student relationship cannot evolve into a meaningful learning community. Based on this identified gap, this study recommends optimizing the matching mechanism by adopting a more reasonable two-way selection process. Students would first select from a pool of

qualified tutors based on the tutors' professional backgrounds and availability. They could initiate contact with preferred tutors via email, and tutors would then make a reciprocal selection based on the students' choices as well as their own schedules and course commitments. This two-way, autonomous selection process not only enhances the alignment between students' programs and tutors' disciplinary expertise but also promotes students' learning autonomy and engagement.

Finally, to ensure the system operates effectively rather than in its current procedural and formalistic manner, the author also recommends introducing appropriate monitoring and feedback mechanisms. As European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [13] points out, the absence of systematic feedback and quality assurance mechanisms often leads educational reforms to become symbolic rather than substantive. Currently, there is neither a structured evaluation framework nor feedback channels or performance indicators to assess whether the system genuinely benefits students. As a result, the inefficiency of the Personal Tutor System at the Chinese campus—despite decades since the university's establishment—has attracted little attention and has been largely tolerated. This issue could be effectively addressed with as few as one survey per semester for both students and tutors.

8 Discussion

Unlike previous studies that mostly focus solely on students' experiences, this study adopts a dual-perspective approach, integrating both student and tutor viewpoints to examine the Personal Tutor System at this representative Sino-foreign university. By horizontally comparing the issues reported by students with the feedback from tutors, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of the institutional and structural factors that influence the effectiveness of the Personal Tutor System. In doing so, it identifies the fundamental institutional-level issues that underlie the system's current inefficiencies and unsatisfactory outcomes. Through this investigation into the transplantation of the UK educational model into the Chinese context, the study not only pinpoints the root causes of the system's inefficiency but also highlights the critical importance of contextual adaptation in cross-cultural educational model transfers. These findings provide valuable insights for the development of increasingly prevalent Sino-foreign co-operative programs in higher education.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, particularly with regard to tutor interviews. Although the three tutors interviewed represented a range of experience—from one year to multiple years in the role—the possibility of idiosyncratic responses cannot be ruled out, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study primarily relies on qualitative interviews, and both students' and tutors' accounts are likely subject to personal biases, which may not fully capture the actual functioning and effectiveness of the system.

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