



Student Voice in Personal Tutoring

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This study focuses on student voices within personal tutoring at the University of Lincoln. It asks the questions: What do students think of their personal tutoring experience at the University of Lincoln? Do students see themselves as partners with their tutors? What language do they use to describe this relationship? How does the experience of international students compare with home students? Before completing the investigation, a literature review was conducted in order to help answer the above questions. Literature around the student voice in personal tutoring and engagement in tutoring was investigated to help to understand the personal tutoring relationship and the idea of partnership. Personal tutoring generally was researched, and personal tutoring of international students. The study began with an online survey, open to any students within the university, around their experiences of personal tutoring. Subsequently, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 students across the four colleges of the university, with three of the four colleges being well-represented. It was found in the interviews that a good proportion of students would seek advice from their personal tutors first about a range of issues. However, a number of students maintained that they would approach the most relevant person directly. The majority of students experienced a positive relationship with their personal tutors. However, a small number found their tutor distant or unfamiliar. Group tutorials were largely found to be useful spaces for students to express their voices. Differences were identified in the experience of international students, most saying that they would contact friends, and relatives before using their personal tutor or university services for personal issues. Some noted that tutors went above and beyond what would be expected of a personal tutor. In conclusion, it is recommended that all staff receive training on referrals, and tutors responsible for international students should receive more training, particularly around helping students transitioning into the culture of the UK. The findings of the study indicate that personal tutors could play an important role in enabling students' voices to be heard and could be a vital source of help for international students transitioning into UK Higher Education.

Keywords: personal tutoring, student voice, international students, higher education, student engagement

INTRODUCTION

The student-centered focus of Higher Education influenced by the 2012 increase in tuition fees and questions around the relationships between universities and students has meant that universities have emphasized the personalization of the learning experience. This has brought personal tutoring and its effectiveness into the forefront of ongoing discussion and investigation (Lochtie et al., 2018).

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This has led to an increase across the sector in developing and improving tutoring provision (Grey and Osborne, 2018).

This study is particularly focused on listening to students' voices around their personal tutoring experience, and attempts to answer the questions:

- What do students think of their personal tutoring experience at the University of Lincoln?
- Do students see themselves as partners with their tutors? What language do they use to describe this relationship?
- How does the experience of international students compare with home students?

The study took place in the University of Lincoln, beginning with an online survey and followed by interviews with 30 students across the university.

The research is situated in the interpretative paradigm, as it attempts to understand and describe the lived experiences (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012) of the students. This paradigm involves the view that truth is subjective and reality is socially constructed (Cohen et al., 2009). It is also important to consider the multi-cultural aspects involved in the study. It is acknowledged that student behavior may be context dependent, and that attitudes are instrumental in their views of the personal tutoring experience. As students and tutors are from many different countries and backgrounds, perceptions may be shaped by cultural contexts, which will in turn affect views of the personal tutoring relationship (Wisker et al., 2008). In a university where there are diverse cultures, this cannot be overlooked. It may be worth considering that as both a Senior and Personal Tutor within the university, the researcher is part of the world under review, and therefore an insider within the personal tutoring community. According to Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009), in qualitative research, the researcher's role is intimate and direct, impacting on the collection and analysis of the data. They also maintain that the personhood of the researcher and whether he or she is a member of the group under study, is "an essential and ever-present aspect of the investigation" (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 55). It is therefore important to be aware of this to mitigate any potential bias.

This paper examines the literature around personal tutoring, the student voice, and international students, before outlining the methods used and results gained from the study. Some conclusions and recommendations will then be shared, along with suggestions for further investigation.

WHAT IS PERSONAL TUTORING?

Personal tutoring has a long tradition in the UK, beginning with the Oxbridge colleges, where students had a specific member of staff identified as the person who would give guidance on personal, moral and academic issues (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993). Over the years, this tradition spread to other institutions, where tutors have varying degrees of involvement with their tutees (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993). The literature highlights three important areas: types of personal tutoring, relationships in personal tutoring and impact of personal tutoring.

Types of Personal Tutoring

Earwaker (1992) identified three distinct models of personal tutoring: pastoral (in which a tutor provides personal and academic support), professional (in which students are referred to central services), and integrated curriculum (in which tutorials are part of timetabled provision). Currently, most institutions operate a hybrid of these models (McFarlane, 2016).

Relationships in Personal Tutoring

The relationship between a student and their personal tutor can be crucial to those students who choose to take advantage of this service. Several researchers have emphasized the importance of this relationship, including Laurillard (2002), who states that student and tutor dialogue is essential for effective learning. In a similar way, Chickering and Gamson (1987) state that this contact is important for student motivation and participation. Thomas (2012) emphasizes the importance of the human element of education, and Wilcox et al. (2005) discuss the essential nature of the role of social support for first-year students.

Stephen et al. (2008) conducted a study into students' experiences of the personal tutoring support they received at university. Students emphasized a need for a caring, empowering relationship with their personal tutor, who should be empathic and proactive in the support they offer. This confirms the above findings that the role of social support is fundamental to students feeling settled and that personal tutors are in an ideal position to deliver this. Wootton (2006) uses the word "conduit" to describe the role of the personal tutor (p. 118), who should direct the students to specific services for support. In Freeman's (2014) study, personal tutorials were viewed as useful ways for students to give feedback in an informal setting. This was considered a more authentic way than taking part in surveys. It appears that the tutoring relationship could benefit from a two-way approach, with students giving feedback to tutors and tutors directing students for support.

Impact of Personal Tutoring

Seale (2010) carried out a study which identified supportive tutors as one of four factors which students claimed assisted their learning. Lochtie (2016) similarly found that students interviewed cited personal tutoring as one of the main reasons they chose to remain on their course. This reinforces Thomas's (2012) findings that personal tutors are able to improve the retention and success of students.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDENT VOICE IN PERSONAL TUTORING

There are a number of issues to consider regarding the importance of the student voice in personal tutoring. Some of these issues include quality assurance, power relationships and empowerment, and participation, or lack of participation. These issues are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The Various Aspects of Student Voice

McLeod (2011) identifies four areas in which voice is used in education: voice as a strategy to achieve, e.g., empowerment;

voice as participating in learning and processes; voice as a right to be heard; and voice as expression of difference to promote inclusion, diversity and equity. McLeod (2011) defines voice as not only speech, but also identity, power, a place for genuine reflection and insight, or representation of differences. In addition, Seale (2010) notes the two main purposes for student voice work as quality assurance and staff development. Similarly, Freeman (2014) identifies consumer choice, accountability, democracy and power sharing, student identity, and enhancement of provision as the areas involved in student voice. These definitions, and the belief that participation involves respecting the student voice, inform this study.

Quality Assurance

In terms of quality assurance, Brooman et al. (2015) state that the involvement of students in educational development is becoming more widespread and is largely seen as advantageous. However, they also express concern that it is mainly focused on quality assurance, whereas “student voice” should involve students having more control so learning development becomes less educator-focused.

Power-Distance Relationships and Empowerment

Power-distance relationships is a further aspect to consider in terms of student voice. Seale (2010) mentions that there is a lack of consideration around student-staff power relationships, leading to a lack of thought around equality and empowerment. She states that there is scope to examine, through the student voice, the experiences of students who may feel oppressed, if, for example, they lack the academic skills necessary to participate in the culture of the institution. This could be particularly pertinent for international students, who may lack the academic English skills they require. Seale (2010) also asks if higher education is only interested in one kind of student voice: that which does not seek equality. McLeod (2011) discusses the problem of the “selective bestowing of voice” (p.179), and maintains that allowing a variety of voices to be heard can be unsettling. Consistent with Seale (2010) thinking, McLeod (2011) describes voice as being related to equity, and goes on to outline how voice could involve listening and recognition, rather than simply expression. Seale (2010) also states that dialogue between the tutor and student requires humility on the part of the tutor, that they should not set themselves far apart from the student. This echoes Freire’s (1990) thinking around the tutor-student relationship, in which education should be tutor and student discovering together that which they desire to know.

On the other hand, Earwaker (1992) argues that some imbalance of power in the student-tutor relationship is necessary, as the tutor needs to manage interactions and have the influence to respond to issues. This, he maintains, does not necessarily disadvantage the student. It appears that careful management of this relationship is therefore necessary, and needs to be questioned further.

Carey (2013) case study identifies an imbalance of power between students and tutors, sometimes made evident in the language tutors use to describe the curriculum. Students noted

that it was the ones confident at speaking who were most likely to be heard, leading to the idea that some students may be empowered and some may be constrained. This again asks the question of whose voices staff are listening to, and what language students and tutors use to discuss the student-tutor relationship. Freeman (2014) also discusses language, describing the NSS as mechanistic, using language which places students in a passive role and tutors in a more active role. This, she argues, reinforces the distance between students and tutors. Walker (2018) argues that the personal tutor role should consider student and tutor as equals, using an approach which is non-hierarchical. One of the ways this could be achieved is for staff to become more aware of the language they use in order to minimize power-distance relationships.

Participation and Lack of Participation

An important aspect of student voice is participation or lack of participation. Seale (2010) recognizes the importance of what students are not saying, and conducted a project investigating the e-learning of students with disabilities. The study found that the students were proficient in the use of technology, emphasizing what they can, rather than cannot do. This could also be related to international students: if tutors can focus on what that students can do, it may encourage students to develop further. The main drawback to this study is that students self-selected to take part, so it may be that only those able and willing to give their views did so, whereas other voices may have gone unheard. McLeod (2011) also mentions this problem: that when voice is equated with empowerment, silence is a potential problem. This prompts the question of what counts as voice, and whose voices are recognized (p. 184): an important question, and central to the study being undertaken. In Freeman’s (2014) study, collecting the views of students, it is stated whether a single voice or a number of participants held a certain view. It was important to identify the views of a minority of students, to ensure that all voices were heard. Students identified within informal settings an imbalance of power in the way the university positioned students and academics.

Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) offer a critique of student engagement, and Gourlay (2015) also offers an alternative perspective: that of the “tyranny of participation.” Gourlay’s (2015) study questions what is meant by participation, and states that this could become restrictive and “culturally specific” (p. 403). The paper concludes by stating a need to reframe the idea of student engagement, which is often seen as that which is “communicative, recordable, public, observable and often communal” (p. 404). She goes on to state that quiet listening and thinking are not seen as indicators of engagement and raises the issue of the value of the activities of listening, silence and thinking alone. This brings into question what counts as participation, and could be particularly relevant for international students, who may not be used to making their voices heard.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The limited research suggests that students from different backgrounds are likely to respond to personal tutoring in

different ways. International students are one such group, so this group will be investigated in further detail.

General Information

According to HESA (2018), in 2016–7, 6% of students in UK HE were from EU countries other than the UK, and 13% from countries outside the EU. Many of these students originate from China. For the purposes of this study, international students refers to all students from outside the UK. Most UK universities have departments dedicated to support of international students (Laycock, 2009), including services such as advice and English language assistance.

International students cannot be considered a homogenous group, as there are many “within-group differences” (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007, p. 276). It cannot be assumed that because a student comes from a particular country, they will behave in a certain way.

There may also be differences in the way that personal tutoring is conducted between under- and post-graduate levels. For instance, in some universities, program leaders act as personal tutors for post-graduate students.

Student Participation in Personal Tutoring

Welikala and Watkins (2008) conducted a study of 40 international postgraduate students, who were interviewed about their experiences of learning in the UK. They found that many international students believe that it is the tutor’s place to speak and the student should not question. It could be easy for teachers to assume that such “quiet” students are not engaged, or even do not understand, when in fact they are thinking deeply about a subject, giving it the attention they believe it deserves. For such students a personal one-to-one with a tutor could be incredibly beneficial, as they may not have the confidence or desire to speak out in a larger group. Taking the time to sit and listen and wait for a student to formulate thoughts could contribute to that student feeling valued and respected. Welikala and Watkins (2008) further state that tutors should not misunderstand international students being quiet as passive learning, as in some learning cultures, a formal classroom setting is not an appropriate environment for questioning. This reinforces the view that being silent does not necessarily indicate lack of engagement, but may have cultural significance. Students in this study stated that international student voices are not heard, as the voices of home students leave no space for others. They reported a discrepancy between the way the university claims they conduct teaching, i.e., student-centered, and what actually happens, explaining that home students were allowed to dominate discussions. Additionally, McDonald (2014) interviewed international postgraduate students, and found that students were highly unlikely to question academic staff.

Support Offered by Personal Tutors

Lochtie’s (2016) study compares the personal tutoring support UK international students receive with that of the support in the USA, where “Academic Advising” is carried out by professional advisors, many of whom are graduates. He concludes that there are lessons to be learnt from the system in the USA,

although professional advisers may not necessarily be the way forward, particularly where universities have international offices. 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, and UKCISA (2018) reports that Chinese students would prefer their tutors to be more proactive. However, there is a danger in doing too much for students, as this may not help them to develop as independent learners (Bartram, 2009). Earwaker (1992) describes this as the “paradox” of helping. It is therefore a question of tutors striking a balance between assisting the student and helping them to become autonomous.

Personal Tutoring Relationships

The personal tutoring relationship between tutors and international students may be different from the relationship a tutor might have with home students. Typically, international students see a tutor as a person in authority and maintain a respectful distance (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993). Thus, the power-distance within this relationship would be greater than that of the personal tutor and home student. 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), and also on the extent to which they view themselves as partners. Wisker et al. (2008) state that it can be difficult for tutors to form a relationship as equals with some international students. McDonald (2014) affirms this, in finding that international students were reluctant to speak to an academic, and may therefore miss out on important support.

A recent UKCISA (2018) study of Chinese students’ perception of personal tutoring found that the tutoring relationships in the three higher education institutions studied were not working optimally, and that students had no idea of the purpose of tutorials. The benefit of this study was that it allowed students to submit their answers in Chinese, thus eliminating the possibility of misunderstanding. However, the study did not compare with home students’ views, so it may be that they experience similar issues. This is an issue which requires further investigation, and one which this study hopes to address.

Training for Personal Tutors

McDonald (2014) recommends that staff responsible for international students receive training to support them in this role, particularly in the misinterpretation which can occur if tutors mistake respect and deference for lack of confidence or ability. Lochtie (2016) agrees that more support for these tutors is necessary. McFarlane (2016) also calls for more training for personal tutors, not only for those responsible for international students. Following this recommendation may be useful for enhancing personal tutoring for international students.

The findings from the literature review indicate that there are still unanswered questions and opportunities for further research. One of the areas which would be useful for practice was to discover the personal tutoring experience of students in my institution, and particularly how the experiences of international

students differed. In the literature little evidence of students viewing themselves as partners was found, so this question was also significant. These research questions informed the survey and interview questions which will be discussed in the following sections.

RESEARCH METHODS

A mixed-methods approach was used in obtaining the data required for the study. The research instruments used to gather the required data were an online survey open to all students at the university, followed by 30 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The online questionnaire asked 13 questions around how often students met with their tutors and for what purpose, whether they attended group sessions and whether they found them useful. Questions were also asked in both the online questionnaire and interviews around materials provided as part of an OfS-funded project to enhance tutorials; however, these questions have not been considered in this study as most students were not aware of the materials. The questions from the online questionnaire informed the further questions asked in the interviews. The interview questions were constructed in collaboration with two other members of staff who were experienced personal or senior tutors. The questions (**Appendix**) were piloted with a student representative, who suggested the addition of question 9: “Is there anything else that you’d expect from your personal tutor?” Demographic questions were asked first, followed by questions around the students’ personal tutoring experience. Most of the questions were open, allowing students to elaborate upon their responses. Where the questions were closed or encouraged a binary response, students were prompted to elaborate. The questions were modified as they were asked, as some of them may not have been easily understood by students, for example, question 5 asks “If you had a pastoral issue, who would you go to?” The interviewer explained and gave examples of what might constitute a pastoral issue. However, there could be a danger in this as it may suggest ideas to respondents rather than them thinking of their own ideas (Passer, 2017). To ameliorate this, respondents were encouraged to think beyond initial ideas.

Convenience and snowball sampling methods were employed to ascertain those who were available and willing to be interviewed (Cohen et al., 2009). This was thought to be the most effective way of ensuring student engagement. Additionally, students who had already been approached suggested other fellow students who may be willing to participate. Respondents were invited by their personal tutors, who were informed of the request via the Senior Tutors’ Forum. Being a member of the Senior Tutors’ Forum meant that this was a convenient way to publicize the research. The student representative from the School of Pharmacy personally invited fellow colleagues from her course in addition to this. Students were given a £10 Amazon voucher for taking part in the interviews, which took between 15 and 30 min to complete. The relatively short nature of the interviews meant that respondents would be unlikely to suffer from fatigue. Ethical approval was obtained from the university’s

central system, and all respondents signed an informed consent form. Student names were kept anonymous throughout the study, by use of numbering.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Thirty students were interviewed over a period of 2 months. The respondents were interviewed in a meeting or tutorial room on the university campus, by an academic who was not their personal tutor. The interviews provided around 2,000 words of data per interview. Most of the participants were interviewed individually; however, two of the international students were interviewed together in order to maximize their confidence in responding in English.

The research sought to obtain transparency, dependability and trustworthiness, which is essential for reliability and validity (e.g., Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999; Golafshani, 2003). Throughout the process, transparency was strived for, in, e.g., constructing the questions along with other staff members, taking a reflective approach, and being careful not to make bold claims based on the data.

After conducting the interviews, the audio files were transcribed by the researcher, and coded with use of NVivo. Transcripts were coded thematically, around subjects connected with the students’ personal tutoring experience. As the ontological questions address the nature of students’ lived experiences, it was decided that *in vivo* coding would better reflect the various realities of the participants. According to Saldana (2016), coding has an iterative nature, and is unlikely to be completed as a linear process. This indeed was found to be the case, as codes were created initially and on a second reading were changed or placed in a hierarchy above or below an existing code.

RESULTS

Survey Results

One hundred and sixty seven students responded to the online survey from across the university, mainly in years 1–3, with some in year 4 and some postgraduate. The key findings from this were that 70% of students reported that they attend their group tutorials, although tutors reported the reverse. This discrepancy could be due to the fact that the students completing the survey were typically more engaged with the personal tutoring system. The main reason students reported seeing their personal tutor was for academic support, although 24% mentioned that they would see their tutor for personal issues. 41% of the students stated that academic support was the most valued aspect of personal tutoring, and 38% mentioned that it was just “knowing someone is there.”

Interview Results

Following the online survey, 30 students were interviewed from the four colleges within the university. The students were asked set questions (**Appendix**); however, they were asked to elaborate on certain responses, or further questions were asked if necessary. **Table 1** shows the number of students from each college, and **Table 2** shows the level of study. Twelve of

TABLE 1 | Number of students per college.

College	Number of students	Percentage (%)
College of science	9	30
College of arts	8	27
College of social science	2	7
Lincoln international business school	11	37

TABLE 2 | Number of students per year of study.

Year of study	Number of students	Percentage (%)
1	7	23
2	5	17
3	9	30
4	2	7
Postgraduate	7	23

TABLE 3 | Number of students by country of origin.

Number of students	Country of origin
1	Austria
1	Bangladesh
2	China
1	Colombia
1	Ghana
1	India
1	Japan
2	Thailand
2	Vietnam

the students interviewed were international students, from the countries indicated in **Table 3**.

Question 1 Responses: What Do Students Think of Their Personal Tutoring Experience at the University of Lincoln?

On the whole, students reported a positive experience with their personal tutors, commenting that they saw their tutor as “friendly,” “helpful,” or “supportive,” e.g. Others stated: “They have created an environment that they’re here for you;” “Nice to know you’ve got a person assigned to you;” and even: “I can cry with him if I need to.” Students value the fact that their tutors are approachable, available, and informal but professional. Most students were happy with the level of support received; however, some noted that they would like their tutor to be more proactive. One student maintained that the support received was well balanced, stating: “It’s good that they don’t baby us.” This relates to Earwaker’s (1992) paradox of helping, and highlights the difficulty of maintaining an appropriate balance of helping and enabling the students to be independent. Some students reported that their tutors go over and above what is expected of them: “they already do more than I would expect them to do.”

However, a small number of students stated that the relationship they have with their tutors was “unfamiliar,” as they did not have regular contact with them. Some of these students would prefer to have a tutor in their subject area, with whom they have regular contact.

Some would approach their personal tutor first, particularly if they were experiencing problems: “I always go to my personal tutor, and then see, maybe he’d direct me to people and I would then go to them as well, but I’d go to my personal tutor.”

Other students would go directly to the most relevant person within the university able to deal with their issues. This could be a program or module leader, or a university service such as the library, well-being or support center, or the Students’ Union. It seems that some students need or prefer the personal tutor to act as a “conduit” (Wootton, 2006), whereas others are comfortable directly approaching the most relevant person. It would be interesting to discover if these students share any common characteristics.

Students approach their personal tutors for a wide variety of reasons. Although the university policy is for tutors not to act as counselors, students still seek their help for mental health issues. Some of the reasons students mentioned are:

- Coursework, grades
- Career advice
- Dissertation
- Mental health issues
- Information on relevant services
- Financial help
- Assurance
- Forms signing
- References
- Extensions
- Workload
- General pastoral care.

It is not surprising, therefore, that tutors often need more training in the support they give to students. McFarlane (2016) suggests that due to the expectations of tutors, it is important to provide training.

In addition to one-to-one appointments with personal tutors, students also receive scheduled group tutorial sessions, approximately two sessions per semester, although this varies across colleges. Students in subject areas such as Pharmacy have to attend their sessions to achieve professional accreditation, and therefore report more engagement with these sessions.

Group tutorials are seen by a good proportion of students as a space where their voices can be heard and they can give feedback on aspects of their experience at university. One student stated: “our personal tutor is quite interactive, so it’s quite helpful that we all find them approachable, that becomes much easier, makes things much easier to discuss in group sessions.”

Students reported the sessions as having a relaxed atmosphere, useful discussions, and the opportunity to air common problems. In some colleges, group sessions are used as academic skills workshops, and others for informal discussion. Group sizes

range from 6 to 30, and, unsurprisingly, those students in small groups reported more willingness to discuss and an overall more positive experience.

On the negative side, some students reported a general lack of attendance at the group sessions, that they were unwilling to raise issues in a group or that the sessions were “pretty useless.” Their suggestions included more individual sessions, more subject-specific help, and some suggested seeing their tutor more frequently.

Students largely found the resources useful, although many were not aware of them until the interview, and many stated they would return to them to use as and when necessary.

Question 2 Responses: Do Students See Themselves as Partners With Their Tutors? What Language Do They Use to Describe This Relationship?

Students who had worked with members of staff on projects generally reported feeling as “equals,” and “they are open to our ideas and suggestions”; however, the language used did not always reflect this. Phrases such as “it’s up to me to adapt,” “he would tell me what to do and send me on my way,” and “aiding them” place staff firmly in supervisory roles, with the students as assistants. One student reported a discrepancy between what the university said they do and what actually happens and used the phrase “we are about 80% equals,” concurring with Welikala and Watkins (2008) findings.

Most students feel that they have a voice, and that tutors give everyone an opportunity to speak. On the whole, they feel listened to and that their feedback is acted upon. Personal tutors encourage interactivity and encourage students to feel confident. One student stated: “Everyone’s got a voice here,” and others concurred with this.

However, some stated that only one or two students contribute to the sessions, concurring with McLeod’s (2011) idea of selective bestowing of voice. Some stated that they would not feel confident saying something if it could be taken the wrong way, that they did not feel comfortable speaking in a large group, or that it was difficult to get others talking: “I feel like I’m the group spokesperson.” This echoes Carey (2013) research that it is the ones confident at speaking who are most likely to be heard.

Question 3 Responses: How Does the Experience of International Students Compare With Home Students?

The largest observed difference with the majority of the international students was that they would rather contact friends and family, often in their home country, than speak to a tutor about personal issues: “Maybe we just talk to each other”; “I talk with my family, my mum and my friends in Thailand.” This reiterates the findings of Welikala and Watkins (2008) and McDonald (2014), who state that international students may be more reluctant to ask for help. Most stated that they were happy to contact their tutor for academic issues, however. As discovered in the literature review, it may be that cultural differences mean that international students have a more distant relationship with

their tutors, and therefore would not want to approach them about personal matters.

The students interviewed appeared to be comfortable in expressing their views in a group; however, a few stated that they would only mention issues in extreme cases: “I will prefer not to say anything... I’m not confident to talk in a group meeting... if I have something important, I will talk about it.”

The international students interviewed had no experience of working alongside staff on any projects, possibly because most of them were relatively new to the university. Neither was there any indication that they saw themselves as partners, affirming Wisker et al. (2008) mention of the difficulty for tutors and international students to form a relationship as equals.

Some of the international students discussed their struggles with the English language, and mentioned that their tutor was willing to help them with grammar and academic writing. Some indicated they appreciated their tutor using “easy to understand” language, and one said that her tutor did much more than she would expect and that which she had experienced in her home country: “I really feel very well cared for”; “it’s really more than I would expect of any tutor to do for us.”

A group of international direct entry students into level 3 were provided with bespoke tutorials around transitioning into study in another culture, and these students stated that the sessions they received were incredibly beneficial. On the use of case studies, one student stated: “This case is very easy to understand. It had a lot of the same problems as me.” These students stated that they would prefer more of this support, in agreement that more intercultural support would be beneficial (Lochtie, 2016), and support should continue beyond induction Leask and Carroll (2011).

DISCUSSION

Although this study was limited by the fact that the students who took part were arguably more engaged with personal tutoring, some tentative findings have been presented.

The first point to note is that all student-facing members of staff can be seen as personal tutors: many students would approach the most relevant person concerned, whether a personal tutor or another member of academic or support staff. As a result, a sensible approach would be to provide training to all staff enabling them to act as effective gatekeepers to support students. Referral of students is not always straightforward, and requires careful handling (Wisker et al., 2008). It may be interesting to conduct further study into the network of support students rely on, and where the personal tutor fits within this.

Personal tutoring sessions could be a useful vehicle for students to feedback on aspects of their university experience, and an opportunity for their voices to be heard in a more informal setting than a survey. To achieve this, it is recommended that group tutorial sizes are small, or students are given more opportunities for one-to-one meetings. It should not be assumed that if a student is not expressing themselves vocally, they are not engaging with the sessions. Alternative vehicles for students to express their voice could be considered within personal tutoring provision.

Partnership and listening to the student voice within personal tutoring is another area which would be interesting to explore

further, and ways to listen to “quieter” students could be investigated. It seems to require more effort on behalf of the tutor to listen to the voices of international students, as they may not always be willing to share their views or issues. These findings concur with the literature explored which stated that international students do not always access the support available (Welikala and Watkins, 2008; McDonald, 2014). Tutors of international students should receive training specifically around interaction with students of different cultures, and be prepared to be more proactive in their support, taking time to cultivate a relationship. It is also apparent that international students appreciate support in transitioning to another culture, as suggested by Lochtie (2016), and the personal tutor could be ideally placed to deliver this. More research could be carried out to ascertain the type of support international students might require.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that further research is required in many of the areas discussed. For example, tutors could benefit from further discussion around how much support is the ‘right’ amount to give. This would be different for different groups of students, for example, international students may require more support, and those who are prepared to approach the most relevant person directly would require less.

This paper has emphasized that personal tutors have an incredibly important role to play in providing an outlet for the student voice, particularly those whose voices are not regularly heard. They could also be crucial in helping international students in their transition from education in their home country to that within the UK. It has also suggested areas for further research which could enhance the personal tutoring experience of students.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated for this study are available on request to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Lincoln. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2020.00120/full#supplementary-material>

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Conflict of Interest: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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