

## Tensions in Learner Support and Tutor Support in Tertiary Web-based English Language Education in China

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Résumé de l'article

Based on the findings of a national survey conducted in 2004 designed to examine the support systems for both learners and tutors engaged in tertiary-level Web-based English education in mainland China, this paper reports the findings of secondary analysis by identifying the tensions in the current learner and tutor support systems.

For learner support, four tensions were analyzed: (1) vigorous institutional learner support efforts versus learner utilization of the provisions; (2) learner qualities development versus academic support; (3) learner technical competence versus learner participation in online services; and (4) the relationship of face-to-face components and online components in learner support system design.

For tutor support, four tensions were identified: (1) institutional conceptual understanding versus the actual practices; (2) tutor' enthusiasm versus tutor's perception of online education; (3) tutor responsibilities versus tutor commitment, and (4) current tutor support service repertoire versus tutor improvement areas.

The paper analyzes possible causes for the tensions and proposes some solutions to address these tensions.

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November – 2005

## ***Tensions in Learner Support and Tutor Support in Tertiary Web-based English Language Education in China***

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### **Abstract**

Based on the findings of a national survey conducted in 2004 designed to examine the support systems for both learners and tutors engaged in tertiary-level Web-based English education in mainland China, this paper reports the findings of secondary analysis by identifying the tensions in the current learner and tutor support systems.

For *learner support*, four tensions were analyzed: 1) vigorous institutional learner support efforts versus learner utilization of the provisions; 2) learner qualities development versus academic support; 3) learner technical competence versus learner participation in online services; and 4) the relationship of face-to-face components and online components in learner support system design.

For *tutor support*, four tensions were identified: 1) institutional conceptual understanding versus the actual practices; 2) tutor's enthusiasm versus tutor's perception of online education; 3) tutor responsibilities versus tutor commitment; and 4) current tutor support service repertoire versus tutor improvement areas.

The paper analyzes possible causes for the tensions and proposes some solutions to address these tensions.

**Keywords:** learner support; tutor support; China; Web-based; tertiary; English language education; tension

**Editor's Note:** Descriptive findings of the survey were reported in three earlier published papers regarding learner support and tutor support systems (Wang, 2004), resources development and delivery systems (Cao, 2004), and assessment systems (Tang, 2004) at tertiary-level Web-based English education in China. This paper is a secondary analysis of the survey findings based on Wang's preliminary explorations of the descriptive features of learner support and tutor support systems. Tensions are identified and analyzed in this paper.

### **Introduction**

Since 1998, the Chinese Ministry of Education has approved of 68 institutions of higher learning experimenting with Web-based education in China. Although still in its experimental phase, Web-based education in China has grown into both a promising and robust mode of educational

delivery, as evidenced by approximately 1,373,000 registered students as of the end of 2002 (China Ministry of Education, 2004). As of June of 2005, 3,000,000 students majoring in 153 disciplines were registered at 2,800 learning centers across China (Liu, 2005). The Chinese Ministry of Education attaches great importance to the development of online education, which is deemed important for achieving the lifelong educational mission of the country (China Ministry of Education, 2000, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2003, 2004).

Considering the rapid development of this new educational paradigm, it is paramount to acquire a systemic view of the operation of Web-based education at both macro and micro levels, which historically have been under-investigated compared to the efforts of other governmental organizations, academics, and research bodies (Haddad and Draxler, 2002; Bell, Bush, Nicholson, O'Brien, and Tran, 2002; The E-learning Advisory Group, 2002; Advisory Committee for Online Learning, 2001; The Sloan Consortium, 2003).

Against this backdrop, in early 2004 a national survey on tertiary-level Web-based English education in China was conducted to investigate current systems of learner support, tutor support, resources development and delivery, assessment, and quality assurance at the levels of institutional decision makers, tutors, and learners. Specifically, this national survey endeavored to explore the five questions below:

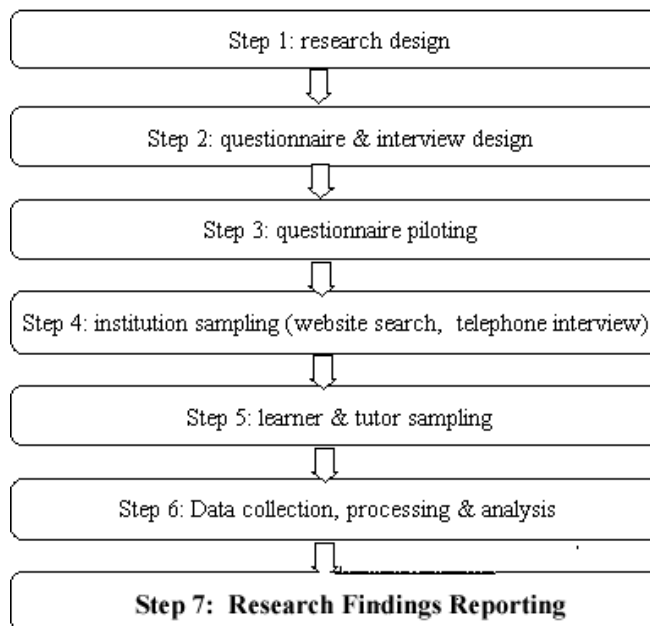
1. What support services do tutors and learners need?
2. What support service repertoire is provided for them?
3. How do they receive the support services?
4. What do they perceive the effects of the support services to be?
5. What support initiatives are Chinese online institutions currently planning?

For the purpose of method and data triangulation, the survey was administered to institutional decision makers, tutors, and learners.

### **Summary of the Descriptive Findings of 2004 National Survey**

This survey was administered between January–May 2004. Two questionnaires were administered to tertiary-level English online learners and tutors respectively. Structured interviews were also conducted with institutional decision makers responsible for academic affairs. The data was collected, analyzed, and compared between the three subject groups for consistency in their responses. Figure 1 below illustrates the seven step research procedure used for this study.

**Figure 1.** Seven step research design and data collection, analysis, and dissemination procedure



### Subjects

Three subject groups were identified for this study, each meeting different sampling criteria. Institutions providing online English degree programs for at least one year were considered as valid institutional subjects. Twelve out of 68 online institutes of higher education met the criteria and eight confirmed their participation in the project. For logistical reasons, the research was conducted at the headquarters of the eight institutions. The institutions ( $n = 8$ ) participating in this study were geographically located across the Chinese mainland. Institutional dispersion is described in Table 1 on the next page.

**Table 1.** Information on subject institutions

Institution	City	Years of Online Programme Operation	Institution Type
1	Beijing (Northeast China)	3	Comprehensive
2	Beijing (Northeast China)	3	Language education
3	Beijing (Northeast China)	4	Comprehensive
4	Shanghai (Mideast China)	3	Comprehensive
5	Shanghai (Mideast China)	3	Normal
6	Xi'an (Northwest China)	3	Normal
7	Wuhan (Middle China)	3	Normal
8	Fuzhou (Southeast China)	3	Normal

The sampling criteria for selecting tutor subjects were: four tutors ( $n = 4$ ) (two full-time and two part-time tutors) with at least one year tutoring experience at the headquarters of each of the eight institutions. More tutors ( $n = 2$ ) were selected if the English learner population at the headquarters exceeded 1,000. Part-time tutors were chosen if there were no/ insufficient full-time tutors at the institutions. Forty eight ( $n = 48$ ) questionnaires were administered; thirty five ( $n = 35$ ) questionnaires were returned from the tutors, resulting in a return rate of 72.9 percent.

The sampling criteria for selecting learner subjects: Two intact classes of learners (one Bachelor of Arts program and one Diploma program) were selected for each school. The class size varied among the participating institutions. At total of 560 questionnaires were administered to the two intact classes of learners; two hundred and sixty one ( $n = 261$ ) learner questionnaires were returned, resulting in a return rate of 46.6 percent.

## **Method and Statistical Analysis**

For method and data triangulation, the survey was administered to institutional decision makers, tutors, and learners. The survey data was processed with SPSS software (version 11.0) and analyzed to generate a descriptive picture of learner support system for tertiary-level Web-based English education in China. Forty-six ( $n = 46$ ) unfinished/ spoiled questionnaires were declared invalid; two-hundred fifteen ( $n = 215$ ) learner questionnaires were considered valid. Given the limited tutor and management sample size and the small number of the uncompleted questions, this treatment was conducted only with the learner respondents. The valid sample size is reported as:

$$n \text{ learner} = 215; n \text{ tutor} = 35; n \text{ management} = 8$$

## **Research Questions on Learner Support Systems**

The national survey addressed the following research questions at the levels of conception, operation, and technical.

### ***At the conceptual level:***

1. How do Chinese tertiary-level institutional decision makers conceptualize learner support for Web-based English education?
2. How do Chinese tutors involved in tertiary-level Web-based English programs conceptualize learner support for Web-based English education?
3. How do Chinese students enrolled in tertiary-level Web-based English programs conceptualize learner support for Web-based English education?

### ***At the service provision and reception (operation) level:***

4. What learner support services are needed by tertiary-level online English learners?
5. What online and offline support services are provided by Chinese online institutions?
6. How are the support services received by the learners?

7. What are the perceived effects of the support services by the learners?
8. What difficulties do the learners confront when utilizing learner support services?

***At the technical level:***

9. What technical functionalities are employed by Chinese online institutions in their learner support system for tertiary-level Web-based English education?
10. How are the functionalities received by the learners?
11. What technical difficulties do the learners confront when utilizing the functionalities?

### **Research Questions on Tutor Support Systems**

***At the conceptual level:***

1. How do institutional decision makers conceptualize tutor support in tertiary-level Web-based English education?
2. How do tutors conceptualize Web-based education?

***At the service provision and reception (operation) level:***

3. What are the job specifications for tutors?
4. What support services do tutors need?
5. What institutional support services are provided for tutors?
6. How are the support services received by tutors?
7. What tutor support measures are going to be taken by the institutional decision makers in the near future?

***At the quality assurance (conceptual) level:***

8. How is the overall tutoring quality in tertiary-level Web-based English education in China?
9. What institutional quality assurance measures are taken to ensure the tutoring quality in tertiary-level Web-based English education?

### **Basic Findings on Learner Support Systems**

Conceptually, all parties (management, tutors, and learners) engaged in Web-based education agreed that “learner support” was important to effective provision of online learning and teaching. Management, tutors, and learners also placed high importance on learner support.

Operationally, the integration of online and offline learner support system was reported by survey respondents to be taking shape. All online institutions in this study reported providing a blend of

online and offline learner support services, although the ratio between the two delivery means varied between institutions. Both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools were reported being used to engage learners. Despite reporting obstacles, management continued to expand their provision of institutional learner support initiatives. Students also reported their use of learner support services to be generally positive, although the actual support services offered was found to vary between the eight institutions. In summary, learner support was gaining attention from all parties engaged in Web-based English education in China, and efforts are underway to improve the provision of learner support services.

Some important issues emerged from this study. First, learners did not report technical constraints to be a major difficulty. On the other hand, the data collected revealed that students were found to lack autonomous learning qualities needed for self-directed learning. Such lack of autonomous learner qualities not only caused learning problems for the students, it resulted in their ineffective use of learner support services available to them. The data also revealed that both online and offline learner support services must be better designed to benefit online English language learners reliant on integrated provision of English language acquisition skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

### **Basic Findings on Tutor Support Systems**

Conceptually, tutor support should enjoy more institutional attention. However, some institutions reported insufficient institutional control over their tutors. Indeed, because the majority of tutors worked on a part-time basis for the online schools, administrative control over tutors tended to be insufficient. Moreover, when compared to learner support, tutor support typically did not enjoy equal attention from institutional decision makers.

Despite control measures (i.e., occasional inspection visits and learner evaluations of tutor performance) quality assurance measures were generally found to be non-systematic. As such, more quality assurance and enhancement measures should be implemented to monitor base-line tutor quality, and track and monitor their progress.

While indicating that they faced multi-faceted challenges, English teachers participating in this study nonetheless reported that they embraced Web-based English education.

The national survey findings also revealed tensions between managements' philosophies and their good-willed intentions versus their actual practices in terms of support offered to students and tutors. Several important questions emerged; questions demanding further exploration are:

1. Why do learners' under-utilize the online support services?
2. Why do online learners prefer traditional, face-to-face learning?
3. What is the relationship between face-to-face components and online components in support system design?
4. How can tutors be better supported in their tutoring process?

This paper addresses the above questions by identifying four tensions in learner support systems and tutor support systems used for tertiary English online education in China.

## Results and Discussion Part 1: Tensions in learner support

### *Tension 1: Vigorous institutional learner support efforts vs. scant learner utilization of the provisions*

Conceptually, there was a consensus among the managers surveyed as to the importance of providing learner support to facilitate learning. Seven of eight managers surveyed reported that a blended delivery format of online and offline support services as the predominant means of support delivery. Both synchronous and asynchronous communication was reported at varied levels among the online institutions. Tables 2, 3, 4, below outlines the current learner support service repertoire offered by these eight institutions.

**Table 2.** Provision of synchronous communication in learner support reported by the eight institutions

<b>Synchronous Communication</b>	<b>Number of Institutions (n = 8)</b>
Voice and Text	6
Text	2
Voice	1
Voice and Text and Video	1

**Table 3.** Provision of asynchronous communication in learner support reported by the eight institutions

<b>Asynchronous Communication</b>	<b>Number of Institutions (n = 8)</b>
Course forum	6
Free discussion forum	5
Formative assessment	5
Tutorial playback	4
Listserv	3
Online library	1
Class homepage	1

**Table 4.** Provision of offline learner support services reported by the eight institutions

<b>Offline Services</b>	<b>Number of Institutions (n = 8)</b>
Tutorial	8
Telephone helpdesk	7
Student organization	6
Study group	5
Lecture	2
Extracurricular activities	1

Tables 2, 3, and 4 above show that offline services still dominate the learner support system design with all institutions providing face-to-face tutorials, and seven out of the eight schools offering helpdesk services. Nonetheless, because the majority of the online institutions surveyed were adding an online component to their support system at the time of this survey, a blended support model was found to be emerging. Indeed, both synchronous and asynchronous



communication tools were reported to be available for the learners, thus enriching the learner support service, as listed in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Service contents of learner support provisions reported by the eight institutions

<b>Service Contents</b>	<b>Number of Institutions (<i>n</i> = 8)</b>
Technical support	5
Online learning strategies	4
English learning strategies	4
Course learning strategies	4
Course learning support	4
Affective support	3

Table 5 outlines the range of support services available to online learners of English in China. Note that this table shows that institutional efforts are made by approximately half of the schools to support learners technically, meta-cognitively, cognitively, and affectively.

Were these institutional efforts well received by the learners? The utilization rate of the online services was found to be low according to the survey data (see Table 6). Compared to online services, offline services enjoyed no better learner utilization except for face-to-face tutorials.

**Table 6.** Learners' ratings of online learner support services

<b>Online Services</b>	<b>Learner Participation ("often participate" choice)</b>
Synchronous programmes (text communication)	20.5%
Synchronous programmes (voice and video and text communication)	20.0%
Synchronous programmes (voice and text communication)	16.7%
Synchronous programmes (voice and video communication)	15.8%
Synchronous programmes (voice communication)	12.6%
Formative assessment	33.5%
Tutorial playback	23.7%
Course forum	17.7%
Free discussion forum	16.3%
Class homepage	14.0%
Listserv	11.6%
Online library	9.8%

**Table 7.** Learners’ ratings of offline learner support services

<b>Offline Services</b>	<b>Learner Participation  (“often participate” choice)</b>
Tutorial	79.5%
Lecture	20.9%
Study group	15.3%
Student organization	13.0%
Telephone helpdesk	10.2%
Extracurricular activities	7.4%

The problem that emerged was that online learners still preferred the conventional classroom-based learning style of interacting with, and receiving knowledge from, their teachers face-to-face, despite the fact that there were alternative online support provisions available to them. This disconnect between online students’ use of online learner support versus conventional offline learner support available reveal that Chinese online learners are behaving like offline learners, in that they are “stubbornly” sticking to using limited, face-to-face offline learner support services while under-utilizing more plentiful online learner support provisions. This apparent deadlock between online support provisions and conventional face-to-face tutorials needs to be addressed. The tension between institutional support efforts and low learner utilization rates of online services calls for in-depth investigation into the question: “Is the low utilization rate due to the lack of self-directed learner qualities? Ineffective learning strategies? Technical incompetence on the part of the learner? Or poor service quality? Table 8 below provides part of the answer to the questions.

**Table 8.** Five major learner difficulties identified in utilizing learner support services

<b>Learner Difficulties in Using Services</b>	<b>Percentage of Learners</b>
Poor time management	47.4%
Ignorance of available services	37.2%
Unawareness of importance of services	29.8%
Technical constraints	27.9%
Limited items of high-quality support services	26.9%

From this data, it is apparent that the major contributing factors underlying the low utilization rates of online learner support reported by online students stem from their lack of self-directed learner qualities and learning strategies. This finding suggests that more attention must be paid to improving learner’s time management skills, self-regulation, and self-directed learning strategies from the beginning (Zimmerman, 1998, 2000; Zariski and Styles, 2000). In other words, in order to bring the blended learner support services into full play, it is important for students to develop well-rounded, self-directed learner qualities and effective learning strategies from the beginning (Wang, 2005).

***Tension 2: Learner qualities development vs. academic support***

Table 9 on the next page outlines the survey findings, which reveal that learners typically encounter a number of difficulties.

**Table 9.** Perceived difficulties by learners in the learning process

<b>Learner Difficulties</b>	<b>Percentage of Learners</b>
1. Heavy study load	54.6%
2. Lacking autonomous leaning strategies	34.7%
3. Inability in using resources effectively	34.3%
4. Lacking time management skills	33.3%
5. High difficulty level of textbooks	30.6%

It is noted that of the five learner difficulties outlined above in Table 9, meta-cognitive strategies (i.e., individual’s knowledge on his/ her own cognitive process) (Flavell, 1976; 1987) and the lack of self-directed learner qualities (i.e., resources management strategies) (Pintrich and De Groot, 1990) were identified as core problems hindering students’ effective use of online learner support provisions. In light of this finding, the design of learner support systems must aim to support the dual-objectives of 1) facilitate students’ sense and use of self-directed learning strategies (Moore, 1972); and 2) provision of continuous academic (course-based) support during students’ learning process. Indeed, of those institutions surveyed the data revealed that there is currently a very real danger in over-targeting course-based support at the expense of developing well-rounded self-directed learner qualities in students. As such, these institutions may fall into the trap of chasing small gains, while at the same time ignoring the larger issues of training learners capable of learning. Table 4 illustrates that the dual objectives were not even effectively set by half of the online institutions. Table 10 below illustrates the dilemma currently faced by these institutions.

**Table 10.** Major institutional obstacles in providing learner support

<b>Obstacles in Providing Learner Support</b>	<b>Number of Institutions (<i>n</i> = 8)</b>
Learner lacking autonomous learner qualities	7
Institution lacking technical capability	6
Institution lacking human resources	3
Financial constraints	2

The majority of the online institutions reported that they faced the problem of students lacking all-round learner qualities, which subsequently hindered them in providing effective learner support initiatives. These problems were moreover compounded by institutions’ lack of technical capacity, human resource capacity, and the funds need to expand such necessary capacity. Despite these obstacles, all managers reported that they would continue their efforts in providing learner support. Indeed, among the eight Chinese online institutes surveyed, some had already paid emphasis on student re-education. For example, one institute launched a “whole person” campaign aimed at transforming conventional students into competent, self-directed, online learners (for details visit [http://www.beiwaionline.com/degree/zx/daohang/t20040924\\_1110.htm](http://www.beiwaionline.com/degree/zx/daohang/t20040924_1110.htm)).

In a sense, Chinese online institutions have been given the mission of emancipating students from their engrained learning habits that enslave themselves to conventional receiving-type learning styles, towards the new, self-directed constructivist learning styles. Only when this objective is achieved, however, can learners make better use of the blended support provisions emerging and currently on offer.

***Tension 3: Learner technical competence vs. learner participation in online services***

The survey yielded optimistic findings on learner access to the Internet (Table 11) and learner computer skills prior to enrollment (Table 12).

**Table 11.** Learner access to the Internet

<b>Access to the Internet</b>	<b>Percentage of Learners</b>
ADSL	52.6%
Modem	22.3%
LAN	12.1%
Other	13.0%

**Table 12.** Computer skills of the learners prior to enrollment

<b>Computer Skills</b>	<b>Percentage of Learners</b>
Computer professional	4.5%
Skillful use of the computer and ability to solve technical problems	22.7%
Skillfully use of most application software	35.2%
Use of simple application software	33.6%
Do not know how to use the computer	4.0%

Theoretically, learner access to the Internet and concomitant computer skills to effectively use the Internet (as presented in Tables 11-12) should be found conducive to learner utilization of various online services. In actual practice, however, it was found that having these skills did not serve students well. In this case, students’ technical competence and Internet access did not successfully translate into successful use of online support services as shown in Table 6. Indeed, it is naïve to think that providing students with technical support would automatically translate into their becoming competent, resourceful online learners. As such, online institutions throughout China are being challenged to change learners’ current, deep rooted preference for traditional face-to-face support scenarios to that of integrated, offline support services.

***Tension 4: face-to-face component vs. online component in the design of learner support system***

The survey findings show students’ strong preference for face-to-face components in the learner support system (Table 6). When questioned about their expectations on online support services, 38.1 percent of learners surveyed chose “tutorials supplemented with online learning” compared to 25.9 percent of learners choice of “online learning supplemented with tutorials.” Given that online support services were under-exploited and generally un-favoured by Chinese online English language learners, online services provided by some institutions was found to be simply that of lip-service. Thus this finding suggests that it is very important to research the fundamental design of learner support systems for Web-based English education. From our research, a number of key questions arose: How should online institutions holistically integrate online components in their overall learner support system design? What is the relationship between online support and offline support? What are the roles and functions of online learner support compared to that of offline learner support? Is more online support better? If not, what support services should go online and what should go offline? What English language skills can be better developed online

and what skills can be better developed offline? What online functionalities best support English language education? What functionalities can be used to deliver what types of learner support services for the development of various English language skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking)?

## **Part Two: Tensions in Tutor Support**

### ***Tension 1: Institutional conceptual understanding vs. institutional practices***

During the structured interviews conducted with all eight institutional decision makers, consensus was achieved that tutors play a central role in online education. It is therefore important to support tutors in their work. Current reality, however, does not match this good-will as articulated by the decision makers surveyed. In terms of tutor support, only five of the eight online institutions had established a center/ department providing tutor support services. And even though seven of eight online institutions have established a specialized learner support center, the concept of tutor support was nonetheless viewed as secondary by some.

There appears to be valid justifications for the current practice: at the time of this survey, all online institutions in China were still in their pilot phase and were busy setting-up their infrastructure. As such, they had little resources available to design a tutor support system. In addition, part-time – not full-time – tutors comprised the majority of the teaching faculty and were typically borrowed from traditional campus based institutions. As a result, it was understandable that most tutors surveyed typically employed tried-and-true campus-based teaching experiences to form the basis of their online teaching practices.

Nonetheless, this lack of systematic tutor support and training has had a domino-effect on Chinese online education system. Because most tutors currently do not have an in-depth understanding of online education as a unique teaching pedagogy, they unknowingly perpetuate and clone traditional face-to-face practices in their tutoring process, which in turn reinforces passive learning habits amongst students, rather than transforming them into self-directed learners capable of effectively learning online.

Tutors and tutoring strategies, as with learners and learning strategies, must be transformed in order to realize the full potential online education offers. Teachers and tutors are on the frontline of learning-teaching interactions – they are in the position to both directly and positively influence learners and their learning strategies. However, only after tutors themselves grasp an in-depth understanding of the pedagogical dynamics of online education, will they be fully equipped to effectively facilitate students to develop into competent online learners (D'Antoni, 2003). Tutor support and training serves this purpose and cannot be overemphasized (Duggleby, 2000; Salmon, 2000; Pajo and Wallace, 2001; Beaudoin, 1990).

### ***Tension 2: Tutor enthusiasm in participation in online education vs. tutor perception of online education***

Table 13 on the next page shows that tutors that responded to this survey expressed high motivation in their participation in online education.

**Table 13.** Tutors' self-reported motivation in participating in Web-based English education

<b>Tutors' Motivation</b>	<b>Percentage of Tutors</b>
High	62.9%
Average	37.1%
Low	0.0%

According to the survey data, tutors' reporting high motivation can be explained by the following: tutors' ease and ability to research more effectively using online Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs); the opportunity to experiment with ICTs for teaching purposes; managements' provision of ICT for teaching and learning; the ability to teach greater numbers students online; and encouragement by school management. In sum, tutors reported to be generally motivated to participate in online education.

Does this favorable participation rate, however, indicate that tutors truly identify with this new mode of education? How did the tutors conceptualize online education? Indeed, the relevant survey data as outlined in Table 14 is not as positive as those outlined in Table 13. Table 14 reports tutors' conviction in capacity of online education in developing qualified English majors.

**Table 14.** Tutor conviction in the capability of Web-based education in developing qualified English majors

<b>Conviction of Tutors in Web-based Education</b>	<b>Percentage of Tutors</b>
High	22.9%
Average	62.9%
Low	11.4%
No	2.9%

Though they reported high levels of support for online education (see Table 13) the data in Table 14 shows that only 23 percent of tutors questioned the capacity of online learning to create quality of online learning outcomes. Tutors' conservative view is partly justifiable: online education, as a new learning and tutoring mode in China, still has a long way to go in terms of understanding, acceptance, and recognition from policymakers, academia, and the general public. Moreover, understanding and recognition of the new education paradigm will not happen automatically for any group, tutors included. Hence, it is important that scaffolding (such as tutor training, process-based tutor support) be introduced to facilitate the transformation of tutor conceptions and tutoring practices (Ragan and Terheggen, 2002).

### ***Tension 3: Tutor responsibilities vs. tutor commitment***

The composition of tutoring faculty was found to be a bottleneck for the majority of the eight online institutions. Most of the eight online institutions surveyed did not have sufficient tenure-track positions prescribed by their parent universities. Faced with the thin faculty size, online institutions in China must typically "borrow" English teachers from other schools. In this survey, only one school reported that it had sufficient full-time tutors, while the remaining seven reported "borrowing tutors" from other schools. Tutors were "lent" to the online institutions by either the English department or School of Foreign Languages within the same university or by partner universities. In short, part-time tutors were not employed exclusively by the online schools. As a result, institutional control over the part-time tutors was found lacking. Given the huge numbers of students seeking English education in China, tertiary English teachers are a highly sought-after

resource, a fact that makes it very difficult for the online institutions to employ contract-based tutors from other sources. This picture is presented in Table 15.

**Table 15.** Faculty make-up among Chinese online institutions

<b>Faculty Make-up</b>	<b>Number of Institutions (<i>n</i> = 8)</b>
A few full-time tutors with many part-timers	5
No full-time tutors	2
Enough full-time tutors	1

To complicate matters, the workload for tertiary English teachers in China is typically heavier compared to other teachers teaching other tertiary subjects (i.e., the average weekly teaching load for English teachers is 12 contact hours). As such, it can be conjectured that only limited commitment and efforts can be assured.

This conjecture is supported by the survey data; it was found that online tutors teaching part-time cannot insufficiently fulfill their responsibilities. Tutor responsibilities comprise giving face-to-face tutorials, conducting online lectures, marking learners’ assignments, communicating with learners by telephone and email, and commenting on assignments in class. Among the required tasks, some posed as difficulties as reported by the tutors (see Table 16).

**Table 16.** Difficult job specifications for tutors (tutors’ perspective)

<b>Difficult Job Specifications for Tutors</b>	<b>Percentage of Tutors</b>
Marking assignments	45.7%
Communication with learners	25.7%
Commenting on assignments in class	22.9%

The three difficult tutoring tasks identified in Table 16 share a common feature: tutors must dedicate more time and effort to teaching learners online as compared to traditional classroom teaching situations (Bonk, 2001).

To ensure they hire and retain committed high-quality tutors, it is important that online institutions design a contract system reflective of the extra effort tutors need to teach online. High level management of parent universities must also develop a strategic and in-depth understanding of online education; it is suggested there that this can be achieved by implementing preferential policies and offering more tenure-tracking positions.

***Tension 4: Current tutor support repertoire vs. tutor improvement needs***

The survey data revealed that tutors had their perceived areas for improvement (see Table 17 on the next page).

**Table 17.** Perceived areas for tutor improvement (tutors' perspective)

<b>Areas for Tutor Improvement</b>	<b>Percentage of Tutors</b>
Mastery of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) theories	60.0%
Sufficient time and energy committed to Web-based education	45.7%
Computer and Internet skills	42.9%
Mastery of English Language Teaching (ELT) theories	28.6%
Feelings of belonging to the online institution	25.7%

All the above self-perceived tutor improvement areas need long-term and systematic support. In contrast, the support provided by the online institutions at the time of this study was mostly based on short-term measures (Table 18).

**Table 18.** Tutor support services provided by online institutions

<b>Tutor Support Services</b>	<b>Number of Institutions Providing Services (n = 8)</b>
Program orientation	8
Technical training	8
Free email account	7
Course-related training	4
Setting up collaborative tutoring group	4
Teleconferencing	4
Office phone	4
Lesson preparation in groups	3
Online tutor forums	3
Free tutoring and research resources related to Web-based education	1
Symposium on Web-based education	1

Comparing tutors' perceived areas that need improvement versus tutor support provisions available at the time of this report, it can be concluded that current tutor support services mainly reside at the operational level, and such provision aims at supporting tutors in the administration of their day-to-day job responsibilities. Tutors, however, reported the need for more systematic and in-depth support and guidance in building a sound knowledge base and skill set needed to support both the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and English Language Teaching (ELT) fields. Tutors also reported that they lacked the time they need to effectively teach online, and lacked a committed sense of belongingness to the online institutions for which they work. Long-term support provisions are therefore needed to address the tutor improvement areas at a deeper level.

## **Conclusion**

As a distinctive mode, Web-based education requires support systems that fundamentally differ from those used for classroom-based education. The tensions identified in the survey deserve careful and in-depth investigation into the root causes and all potential solutions. The tensions bring forth not only signals for change in both learner and tutor support systems design, but is also a harbinger for educational policy makers in China about the purpose of education and the nature of online, Web-based learning and teaching in the exam-oriented Chinese educational



context. In an emancipatory sense, Web-based education holds the key to learner-autonomy, which is fundamentally different from traditional face-to-face passive learner classroom-based contexts. In the same vein, Web-based education also acts to transform teachers' and tutors' roles and similarly requires systematic tutor support provisions (Gu, 2005). As a result, process-based research is needed to investigate the ecological and contextual factors contributing to the tensions.

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