

# The significance of power-distance: teaching students from China

## How does PDI differ between China and the UK?

According to Hofstede (2010), China has a **high PDI**, while the UK has a **low PDI**. The former is characterised by the centralisation of power, paternalism, and a perception that the differences in power between individuals and those in authority are large. China has a PDI score of 80, while the UK has a score of 35. Anything more than a 10 point difference will result in what is effectively a **culture shock** (Smit, 2014); the PDI difference between China and the UK is 45 points.

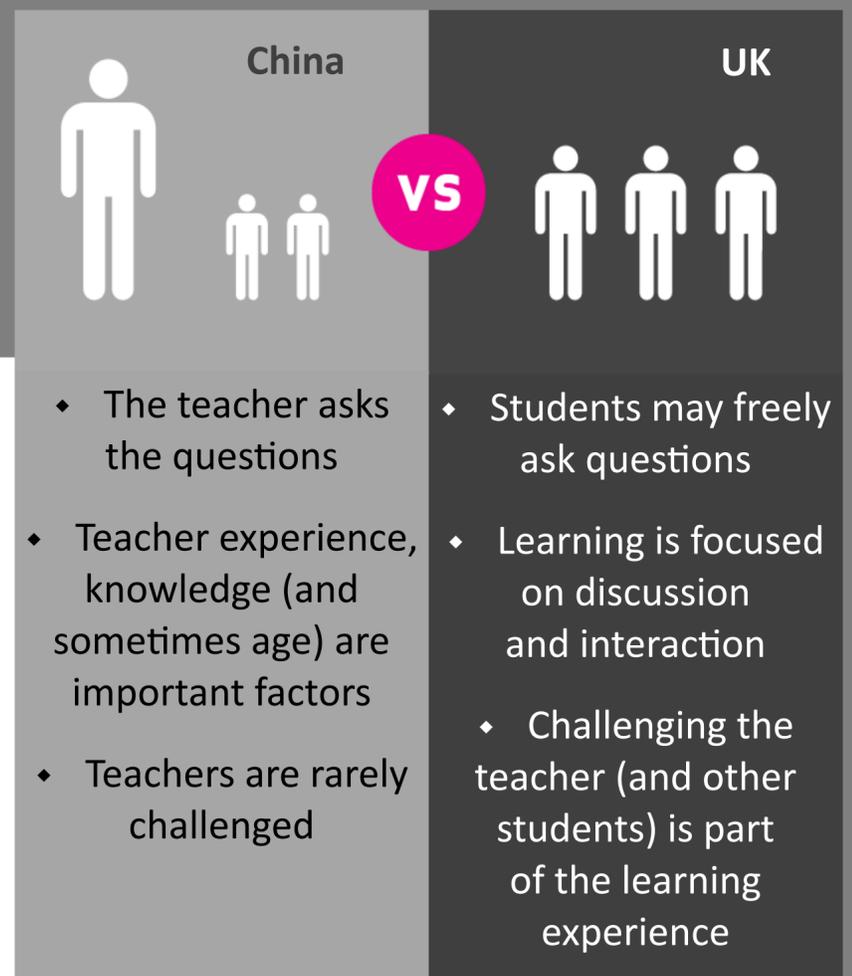
Chinese students entering the UK higher education system are likely to experience the somewhat uncomfortable sensation that their expected relationship with teachers is very different to what they are used to. There are, however, some practical techniques that we can use to make the adaptation easier for them.

## Suggested techniques

- ♦ Allow students time to become comfortable with our low PDI
- ♦ Use technology to enable low-stakes interaction e.g. using responseware
- ♦ Engineer situations where students *must* ask you (or other students) questions
- ♦ Ask students to prepare written questions to ask you (model examples first)
- ♦ Work on interactions and questioning in small groups
- ♦ Be particularly sensitive in high-stakes situations e.g. when providing feedback
- ♦ Use humour and sarcasm with caution; in China saving face is important

## What is power-distance?

It is a way of measuring and comparing the differences in **perceived power** between individuals in different cultures. The concept is normally attributed to Geert Hofstede (2010) who identified it as one of the six key **cultural dimensions**. Although Hofstede's original research focused on a business context, the concept is applicable to education. Countries may be described as having a **high** or **low** power-distance index (PDI). A country with a high PDI will tend to be **hierarchical**, whereas a country with a low PDI will tend to be **egalitarian**.



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## References

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