

## **What are the non-academic impacts of private tutoring? Voices from A-level students in UK urban schools**

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Private tutoring is a growing industry globally. Past research into the effectiveness of private tutoring has proved inconclusive. Studies dedicated to the non-academic implications of private tutoring are scarce. Using a mixed-method approach, our study examined A-Level students' experiences of private tutoring and their perceptions of benefits and drawbacks to additional tuition. The participants (N=26) were students from various UK urban schools who had used private tutoring during their A-Level studies. The study found that students generally felt private tutoring had a positive impact on their education and wellbeing, with many reporting increases in confidence and motivation. However, the additional workload and financial burden of tutoring had a negative impact, particularly as the frequency of private tutoring lessons was increased. Results also indicate that the availability and affordability of private tuition can create an unfair disadvantage for students from less affluent backgrounds. Based on these findings, the paper highlights the needs for governments to consider non-academic impacts of private tutoring, as well as issues related to the distribution of educational resources and provision of equal educational opportunities for all students. Implications for schools, parents, and students are included.

### **Introduction**

Private tutoring has grown in popularity for both mainstream education and home-educated students (Bray, 2021; Guill et al., 2020; Kirby, 2016). Estimates suggest that globally by 2026 the private tutoring industry will be worth \$175,000 million (Zion Market Research, 2021). A number of factors have contributed to the growth of private tutoring, including school closures in the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the marketisation of education (Bray, 2021; Gyóri & Bray, 2021), and competition for access to elite schools and top universities. Urban families in particular seek private tuition, and many tuition companies tend to target densely populated regions for better enrolments. For example, students living in London are twice as likely to receive private supplementary tutoring as those outside of the capital (e.g., Bray, 2021; Sutton Trust, 2019).

However, private tutoring remains under-recognised and un-regulated in many countries, in comparison with its scale and significance for social, economic, and educational development (e.g., Zhang & Bray, 2020b; Zhang, 2019). Tutors can come from a variety of backgrounds including current and retired classroom teachers, university students, volunteers and full-time professional tutors (Bray, 2006; Zhang et al., 2021). This casts doubt on the quality of private tutors, particularly with a lack of professional qualifications on the part of the tutor and raises the concern of safeguarding for pupils (Hof, 2014). In multiple countries, including the UK, due to the lack of regulation and insufficient

monitoring, the true nature and scale of the private tutoring industry remain unknown (Bray, 2021; Kirby, 2016; Zhang, 2019). A lack of regulations also makes getting exact figures on the number of tutors operating within the UK and the proportion of pupils who use this service extremely difficult (Kirby, 2016). This is in stark contrast to the stringent checks, inspections and policies that schools, teachers and other educational institutions are subjected to (Zhang, 2019).

It is therefore worth noting that although private tutoring has moved into the mainstream, and gained attention globally, little research has been conducted into the effectiveness of this method of education and the motivation for using a private tutor (Bray, 2021; Guill et al., 2020). The range of studies is limited, often focused on countries such as South Korea and China where private tutoring is more established and rates of uptake are high (Bray, 2021; Kobakidze & Suter, 2020). Furthermore, there are no dedicated studies into the non-academic impacts of private tutoring. All of the factors mentioned above have been identified in addition to a main focus on academic performance. This research seeks to begin filling this gap by looking specifically to identify the non-academic impacts of private tutoring and add to the body of knowledge about how and why these impacts may arise.

## Literature review

### Private tutoring: Definitions and implications

The most commonly accepted definition of private tutoring is one to one or small group teaching that is provided in receipt of a fee in purely academic subjects in addition to classroom learning (Bray, 2014). This definition is widely accepted because it includes the idea that private tutoring is supplementary to mainstream education and is focused solely on academic subjects; enrichment activities such as sports, music or religious instruction, and tutoring as part of homeschooling are excluded (Zhang & Bray, 2020a).

There are issues in the use of Bray's (2014) definition within the existing literature. Bray's definition includes one to one or small group tutoring, however the group size remains undefined for the majority of studies (Choi et al., 2012; Smyth, 2008). Small group teaching can be interpreted as any class size smaller than that of mainstream schooling, which in the UK is approximately 20 to 30 students per class (DfE, 2022a; Hof, 2014). The effectiveness of tutoring would be affected by the class size, with larger tutor to student ratios meaning the teaching is less tailored to the needs of the individual student.

Bray's (2014) definition of private tutoring excludes tuition provided by peers, family, friends or charities for no financial payment. There seems to be little benefit to excluding free or voluntary tutoring from the definition, particularly in the case of supporting academic subjects alongside traditional mainstream education. In the UK, for example, there are several charities that provide private tutoring in both primary and secondary schools (Sutton Trust, 2019). Students may also receive additional tutoring from family members or friends in addition to mainstream schooling, which is often provided for free

or as part of a service exchange (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2014). All of these forms of tutoring fall outside of the accepted definition, despite them being a valid form of supplementary education.

As indicated above, there are social, economic, and educational implications to the increasing prevalence of private tutoring, and concerns about the equity and equality of educational opportunities are raised (Bray, 2021). As mentioned earlier, some studies found that urban students are more likely to receive private tuition than their rural counterparts, for reasons of both demand and availability of face-to-face tuition (e.g., Kim & Park, 2012; Mahmud, 2019; Zhang & Bray, 2020b). It is also important to note that in-person private tutoring is not as prevalent in rural areas, where the private tutoring industry is less developed and avenues for private tutoring are fewer (e.g., Bray, 2021; Doherty & Dooley, 2018; Smyth, 2008). Individuals willing to provide face-to-face lessons are spread more thinly in rural areas. As a result, tuition companies in general favour densely populated areas for higher enrolments and greater financial gains, and do not target thinly populated rural regions.

In addition, wealthier households are more likely to be able to afford private tuition, either to replace or in some cases to supplement private schooling (Bae et al, 2010; Kirby, 2016). For example, a 2019 study by the Sutton Trust found that 20% of pupils from low affluent families received private tuition compared with 34% of highly affluent households. Therefore, as fee-charging tutoring in general relates to the socio-economic situations of students' families, the tutoring boom can also create an unfair disadvantage for students from less affluent backgrounds, and students who are unable to access private tutoring may feel insecure (Bray & Kwo, 2013; Zhang & Bray, 2020b). Furthermore, family decisions to seek supplementary tuition makes the socio-economic significance of access to private tutoring even more pronounced, and are likely to increase disparities between richer and poorer households in society (Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2019; Kim & Park, 2012; Mahmud, 2019; Zhang & Bray, 2020b).

Generally speaking, tutoring has benefits in supporting students' learning and improves the overall results of schools. These include providing subject-specific support for struggling students, preparation for exams, enrichment, improving confidence, and helping those who wish to remain competitive with peers for academic subjects and career prospects (Mahmud, 2018; Sutton Trust, 2019). However, other than the obvious advantages and academic support that access to private tutoring can provide, there are other ways in which private tutoring perpetuates inequality and social injustice. For example, according to some researchers (e.g., Bray, 2021; Kim & Park, 2012; Mahmud, 2019), urban areas may have more higher-income families who are able to afford private tutoring, and are more likely to host university students who are interested in earning supplementary incomes by working as private tutors. Furthermore, private tutoring is more common in cities where the environments are more competitive and living expenses are high, and in these cases, parents often feel the need to give their children more academic support, and schoolteachers want to work as private tutors to supplement official salaries to make the ends meet (e.g., Liu, 2012). In summary, private tutoring has become an increasingly apparent feature of urban education in many countries, an issue

that impacts the distribution of educational resources in society and efficiency of education systems (Mahmud, 2019; SuttonTrust, 2019).

The existing research often looks at private tutoring and academic performance in isolation (Kobakidze & Suter, 2020; Zhang & Bray, 2020a). Even remedial tutoring studies that target students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds do not incorporate the additional factors that can help, or hinder, academic progress (Bae et al., 2010; Hof, 2014). In viewing tutoring in this simplified relationship, the existing research ignores the complexity of education and social research (Guill et al., 2021). This is one reason why the research into private tutoring is conflicting and frequently difficult to compare (Bray, 2010).

Another reason for the inconclusive evidence for private tutoring improving academic performance is the lack of a consistent definition of private tutoring. The majority of the research focuses on whether students have received private tuition or not, with only more recent studies questioning participants further on the type of tutoring they received, for how long and the frequency of lessons (Kobakidze & Suter, 2020; Zhang & Bray, 2020a). Failing to incorporate these additional variables into research may account for the conflicting results into the effectiveness of tutoring (Bray, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). To date, the evidence for the effectiveness of private tutoring is also inconclusive (Bray, 2021; Kobakidze & Suter, 2020). A summary of the existing literature has been included in Table 1 below. These studies span multiple countries, different age groups, and a variety of academic subjects.

Table 1: Summary of the existing literature studying the relationship between private tutoring and academic performance

Study authors	Subject(s)	Age of students	Sample size	Country of study	Conclusion
Smyth (2008)	General	High school	4709	Ireland	No sig. impact
Choi et al. (2012)	Maths and Reading	High school	3147	South Korea	Positive impact
Ryu & Kang (2013)	Maths, Language and Science	Middle school	8631	South Korea	Positive impact
Berberoğlu & Tansel (2014)	Maths and Turkish	High school	9983	Turkey	Positive impact
Guill & Bos (2014)	Maths	High school	4701	Germany	No sig. impact
Hof (2014)	Maths and Reading	High school	13472	Switzerland	Positive impact
Kim et al. (2016)	English and Maths	Middle school	2943	South Korea	Positive impact
Cole (2017)	Maths and Language	Year 5	2639	Sri Lanka	No sig. impact
Ha & Park (2017)	General	Middle and High school	3387 (middle) 2775 (high)	South Korea	Positive impact

Study authors	Subject(s)	Age of students	Sample size	Country of study	Conclusion
Liao & Huang (2018)	Science	Middle and High school	3750 (middle) 3254 (high)	China	Negative impact
Ullah et al. (2018)	Biology	High school	40	Pakistan	Positive impact
Guill et al. (2020)	Maths and German	High school	11358	Germany	No sig. impact
Liu et al. (2020)	General	Primary and High school	134021	China	Positive impact
Lopez-Agudo et al. (2020)	Maths, Language and Science	High school	63068	Spain	Positive impact
Zheng et al. (2020)	English and Maths	High school	9225	China	Positive impact
He et al. (2021)	Maths	High school	878	China	No sig. impact
Zhang et al. (2021)	Maths	Middle school	2645	China	No sig. impact
Benckwitz et al. (2022)	Motivations	High school	8510	Germany	Inconclusive
Guill et al. (2022)	Maths, English and German	High school	8510	Germany	No sig. impact
Manasrah et al. (2022)	General	Higher education	107	Jordan	No sig. impact
Zhang & Liu (2022)	General	All	6750	Multiple	Positive impact
Zumbuehl et al. (2022)	Maths	High school	12696	Switzerland	Negative impact
Zhang et al. (2024)	Maths	Middle school	1500	China	Negative impact

### **Non-academic impacts of private tutoring**

Some of the studies into private tutoring hint at non-academic impacts on students. Positive additional benefits to tutoring have been suggested to include improved familial relationships, increased confidence and greater motivation both in and out of school. By engaging a private tutor outside of mainstream education, parents are showing interest in their child's education and as a result are more likely to discuss school issues with their child, and are less likely to nag their children about progress and homework as they can to ask the tutor directly for feedback and ensure homework is completed during the additional lesson time (Ireson & Rushforth, 2014; Otto & Karbach, 2019).

Private tutors can provide crucial cultural capital by expanding a student's knowledge and providing experiences above and beyond the core curriculum or even beyond the student's own cultural background (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020). This is invaluable; cultural capital cannot guarantee success, but it can equip a young person as they head into adulthood (Bourdieu, 1986). It is also possible that private tutoring provides pupils with additional time to self-improve and take their education further outside of the classroom thereby increasing their embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

In spending additional time with a tutor on a specific subject it has been proposed that students feel more comfortable and confident within that subject (Hajar, 2019; Subedi, 2018). Increased confidence can have a wide-reaching effect, with improvements in one subject area leading to increased confidence in other areas. In addition, private tutoring can also help students develop their time management skills and provide a greater motivation and focus for their learning (Subedi, 2018). This is supported by further research showing that private tutoring improved student satisfaction scores both for school and familial relationships (Guill et al., 2020).

There are also negative impacts of private tutoring for students and their families. These include increased pressure, an excessive focus on preparation for exams and the increased financial burden on families (Hajar, 2019; Subedi, 2018). The negative effects are amplified when students are subjected to high intensity tutoring (Zhang et al., 2021; Zhang & Gao, 2023).

### **Education and student wellbeing**

Mental health has been a matter of increasing concern in the UK (Humphrey, 2018). It has also been acknowledged in recent years that there is an overlap between mental health and education (Humphrey, 2018). Schools and classroom teachers have been positioned as both the problem and the solution to declining student wellbeing (Gunnell et al., 2018; Humphrey, 2018). Increasing focus on exam grades and the pressure on students and teachers to perform is detrimental to the emotional wellbeing of staff and pupils (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Student Minds, 2019). Nevertheless, the Department for Education is encouraging schools to nominate a senior mental health leader to support teachers in incorporating mental wellbeing practices into their lessons (DfE, 2022b), but this is often viewed as time wasted that could be used to prepare for examinations (Humphrey, 2018).

As with private tutoring, the definition of mental health in the existing research has evolved. Historically there has been a focus on mental ill health (Humphrey, 2018). This is problematic as it focuses on individuals who are struggling, often with very specific diagnosable conditions (Humphrey, 2018). More recently there has been a move to looking at mental health in terms of objective and subjective wellbeing (Humphrey, 2018; Watson et al., 2012). Objective wellbeing relies on social and economic factors as measures of happiness and quality of life (Watson et al., 2012). This often does not consider the person and what is important to them; objective wellbeing assumes that the same factors are equally important for everyone. Subjective wellbeing focuses on the priorities of the individual, identifying what is important to them and how this affects their emotional state (Watson et al., 2012).

Despite there being increasing research into the connection between mental health and education, there is little focus on students studying for A-Levels (e.g., Nash et al., 2021). However, there is evidence that students in Years 12 and 13 experience large amounts of stress and anxiety due to academic pressure (Student Minds, 2019). A-Levels are an

important stage in education, particularly for students wishing to go to university, making it a concern that this is an under-researched area (Nash et al., 2021).

Furthermore, a review of the literature has identified a number of gaps that provide opportunities for further research. For example, the non-academic impacts, such as wellbeing, familial relationships, financial implications, and perpetuating inequality in education of private tutoring on A-Level students (Bray, 2021; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2020; Zhang & Bray, 2020) are frequently overlooked in educational research, not just when evaluating private tutoring (Bray, 2021; Benckwitz et al., 2022).

### **This study**

This study was carried out to identify the non-academic impacts of private tutoring. In understanding the non-academic impacts of private tutoring there is a need to focus on a specific demographic of students. There are two reasons for choosing A-Level students for this research. A-Level students are under-represented in existing educational research and A-Level students are more likely to hire a private tutor than many other age groups (e.g., Ireson & Rushforth, 2014; Nash et al., 2021).

In this research there are two important terms that need to be defined: private tutoring and wellbeing. The definition of private tutoring used here, and communicated to participants in the research is “lessons above and beyond classroom learning in academic subjects delivered either one to one or in groups of fewer than five students”. Note that the requirement for tutors to be paid has been removed from Bray’s (2014) definition of private tutoring. This allows for volunteers or family members who provide private tutoring to be included here. Wellbeing in this research refers to subjective wellbeing, more specifically the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy. In this present study, participants are asked to consider their feelings of happiness and life satisfaction and describe how they felt about themselves and their life (Humphrey, 2018).

### **Method**

This research took the pragmatic approach (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This is because the experience of private tutoring is varied and there are many contextual factors that need to be considered and understood. However, it is possible to collate the multiple perspectives and build up an overall picture of the experience of A-Level students. From this, researchers can find common themes that provide insight into the effectiveness of private tutoring and understand student perspectives on how private tutoring alters their A-Level studies. In doing this we are using multiple realities to answer a single research question.

For this research an online survey was chosen as the method for collecting quantitative data. This was partly because it is possible to draw from a larger population with an online survey as geography is not a limiting factor whereas it is a consideration for a paper-based survey (Lefever et al., 2007). In an effort to improve the quality of the data collected, the researchers also wished to remain removed from the participants at the survey stage to allow for anonymous responses.

Participants were identified through social media posts advertising the survey, contacting local schools, and reaching out to tutoring organisations to advertise the survey to their students. Before starting the online survey and interview, each participant was asked to read a participant information sheet, which detailed on the purpose of the study, the eligibility criteria (e.g., participants were eligible if they were from an urban school and had used private tutoring during their A-Level studies) and was informed that their privacy and confidentiality were ensured in the study. All participants provided their written informed consent.

The survey used for this research consisted of twenty questions with a mixture of closed and open (free text) questions (Appendix A). The survey, which was developed by the authors, was first piloted with two students whose responses were not included in the analysis. Questions in the survey were then revised and retested until they were understood accurately by both pre-test participants. To further test the content and validities of the instrument, another student was asked to review and give suggestions, which as a result improved the pre-test form of the survey. Finally, the revised survey was sent to two experts in the field for further review and refinement.

The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete with the final section being optional for those wishing to volunteer for a follow-up interview. The survey also allowed participants to remain anonymous and only provide their contact details if they wished to volunteer for a follow-up interview. As part of the data security the survey responses were anonymised once any volunteers had been contacted for interview and all data was password protected using two-factor authentication.

There is also a need to collect qualitative data to answer this research question. The survey data indicates if there is a relationship between private tutoring and student perceptions of areas such as academic performance and emotional wellbeing. It is advantageous to go further and understand what students perceive to be the benefits and drawbacks of private tutoring, alongside how and why they feel these effects are produced. Online interviews were selected as the research instrument. The use of video-conferencing software to conduct the interviews reduced the time commitment and made interviews a viable option.

The interviews were semi-structured, and guidance was provided based on the responses of the participants (Appendix B). Participants were offered the option for their interview to be recorded, and how the recording would be stored and used was discussed. In one case a participant asked not to be recorded and the interview continued with only notes being taken as per their wish.

## Results

In total 26 people completed the online survey with three volunteering for a follow-up interview. Participants were students from various UK urban schools who had used private tutoring during their A-Level studies. The closed questions were analysed using SPSS and the open-ended questions in the survey were thematically analysed using NVivo.

Participants were asked to summarise their A-Level experience using up to three words or phrases. This approach was used by Nash et al. (2021) to gain insight into students' experiences and perceptions of A-Level study. Using the same system here these adjectives were then categorised into positive, negative and neutral terms. The results of this analysis are summarised in Table 2. Note that the total count here may be higher than the total number of participants as each response included multiple descriptors. Over half (51.6%) of the descriptors used were classified as negative, with 33.9% as positive and remaining (14.5%) as neutral.

Table 2: The top eight adjectives used to describe the A-Level experience

Descriptor	Count	%	Type
Stressful	8	13	Negative
Interesting	3	5	Positive
Exhausting	2	3	Negative
Fun	2	3	Positive
Hard	2	3	Negative
Tiring	2	3	Negative
Good	2	3	Positive
Regret	2	3	Negative

To further understand how their A-Level experience may have been affected by tutoring, each descriptor was given a score. Positive descriptors were worth 1 point, neutral descriptors were worth 0 point and negative descriptors were worth -1 point. Each participant was then given a score for their A-Level experience based on the three descriptors they provided. A summary of the results is shown in Table 3. Note that only 21 of the 26 participants completed this question.

Table 3: A-Level experience scores separated into students who used a private tutor and those who did not. Here n is the number of participants.

A-Level experience score	Private tutor		No private tutor		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
3	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	2	40	2	9.5
1	6	37.5	0	0	6	28.6
0	0	0	2	40	2	9.5
-1	6	37.5	0	0	6	28.6
-2	1	6.3	1	20	2	9.5
-3	3	18.8	0	0	3	14.3
Total	16	100	5	100	21	100

Participants were then asked a number of follow-up questions to understand how frequently they had lessons, whether these were online or in-person and the length of time for which they used a private tutor. The majority of students (61.1%) used a tutor for more than 6 months while only 16.7% of students used a tutor for less than two months.

Those that had regular lessons tended to have these once a week (44%) with twice a week being the next most popular option. This shows a significant investment in both time and money for the students and their families.

It is worth noting that 16.7% of the participants reported only having sporadic lessons as and when required, rather than having a regular lesson pattern. The majority of participants received purely online tutoring (67%) with the remainder using in-person lessons. It is worth noting that this may be skewed by the timing of the study, immediately following the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, although none of the participants reported using a hybrid of the two, some participants indicated that they preferred to have face-to-face lessons which were readily available before the pandemic.

Participants were also asked to rate how they felt private tutoring had affected their academic performance, their emotional wellbeing and how they felt about their relationship with their tutor. Each of these questions was ranked on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being very negatively, 5 being neither positive or negative, and 10 being very positively. Participants were also asked to reflect on how useful they felt the overall experience of private tutoring was. The Pearson correlation test was used to understand if there is a relationship between length of tutoring relationship and frequency of lessons and these student perceptions. A summary of this analysis is included in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of SPSS analysis of correlations (N=18)

	NPSS Statistics	Academic performance	Emotional wellbeing	Relationship with tutor	Usefulness
Length of private tutoring	Correlation coefficient	0.53	0.428	0.656	0.441
	p value	0.024	0.077	0.003	0.067
Frequency of private tutoring	Correlation coefficient	0.125	-0.119	0.229	0.076
	p value	0.621	0.639	0.362	0.763

To compare the method of delivery and respondent perception of academic performance, emotional wellbeing, relationship with tutor and usefulness of private tutoring, the mean scores for in-person lessons and online tutoring were calculated. Online tutoring scored more highly in every category, with the most surprising result possibly being the relationship between student and tutor which scored on average 8.3 for online tutoring versus 6.5 for in-person tutoring.

NVivo was used to analyse the open-ended questions from the online survey and the transcripts of the three interviews with the aim of finding themes and patterns within the responses. In particular, this was looking to understand the motivations for using a private tutor, if there were any positive and negative outcomes the participants could self-identify from using a private tutor and why they felt these outcomes might have occurred.

When querying the survey responses and interviews there were several common themes that participants provided for why they used a private tutor. In this analysis, synonyms were grouped, for example, *help* and *support* were grouped together. The most common themes included the need to receive academic support, to improve maths skills, and to improve overall grades, as well as the desire to do better in physics classes.

Participants were also asked to identify any positive outcomes they experienced as a result of private tutoring. The five most common themes identified were felt more supported (72%), improved understanding (61%), could ask questions (56%), improved grades (33%) and confidence (28%).

Following this in both the survey and interviews participants were asked to suggest reasons why they feel those positive outcomes came about. There were several common themes across the responses, including the ability to tailor the lesson to the student, the tutor being approachable, gaining study skills, quality of tutor and the tutor being knowledgeable.

The same exercise was also conducted for negative outcomes of private tutoring. The five most common negative outcomes were time consuming, expensive, made things more confusing, tutor did not meet expectations and did not try as hard in school. Participants were asked to suggest reasons as to why they felt these negative outcomes had occurred. There were a number of suggestions including stress, reliance on the tutor, poor relationship with the tutor, errors in lessons and financial burden of tutoring. It's interesting to note here that there was little consistency in responses to this question, each participant provided very different suggestions as to why tutoring provided negative outcomes.

## **Discussion**

There are several interesting results here. The first is the perceptions of students of their A-Level experience. More than half of the descriptors used by participants in the survey were negative. It is worth noting that the participants included those coming to the end of their first year of A-Level study, some who had just finished their final A-Level examinations and university students for whom A-Levels were at least a year in the past. Despite this, the overwhelming experience appeared to be negative. The most frequently used descriptor was stressful which also appeared as a common theme in the qualitative analysis of the open-ended survey responses. In fact, of the eight most common descriptors provided by participants five were negative. Several of these were quite powerful descriptors such as "tiring", "exhausting" and "regretful". Participants implied that their A-Level experience had positive aspects but was generally negative.

Subsequently the participants were given an A-Level experience score based on the descriptors they provided. Interestingly nobody scored +3 which would indicate an entirely positive experience. It was more common for participants to include one positive descriptor with two negative descriptors, giving an overall score of -1. This is particularly true for those who stated they had used a private tutor. When comparing the scores for

participants who said they had used a private tutor versus those who had not, those who had provided lower student perception scores. This could be interpreted in several ways. There is the possibility that the poor experience of A-Levels is a motivator for hiring a private tutor and as such it would be expected that these students would score lower. On the other hand, where participants have finished their A-Levels, it is remarkable that they still felt their A-Level experience was negative even when they had access to a private tutor. This could be due to negative outcomes of using a private tutor, which will be discussed in further detail later.

When looking at the possible relationship between duration of private tutoring and academic performance, emotional wellbeing, relationship with their tutor and the usefulness of private tutoring, a Pearson correlation test was conducted. The relationship between duration of private tutoring and academic performance showed a significant positive correlation,  $r=.530$ ,  $p=.024$ ,  $n=18$ . This suggests that the longer the participants received private tutoring, the better they felt about their academic performance. This is reasonable as a long duration of private tutoring is more likely to allow for gradual improvement and sustained building of confidence, all of which may contribute to a perceived increase in academic performance.

The relationship between duration of private tutoring and the participants' perceptions of their relationship with their tutor also showed a significant positive correlation,  $r=.656$ ,  $p=.003$ ,  $n=18$ . This appears to show that the longer students spend in tuition the better the relationship with their tutor. This is also to be expected as relationships can take time to develop so it is logical that students who are tutored over a longer period of time will have a stronger relationship with their tutor. What is perhaps more surprising about the results of this analysis is that no significant relationship was found between duration of tutoring and emotional wellbeing or usefulness. Being tutored for longer did not seem to have any substantial impact on the students' emotional wellbeing. This could possibly be because students feel the same benefits and drawbacks irrespective of how long they are tutored for. The lack of a correlation between duration and usefulness of private tutoring is somewhat unexpected as it could be anticipated that the longer a student receives tuition the more likely they are to find it useful. On the other hand, it may be that students find private tutoring useful as additional support and this aspect does not change dramatically over time.

Using thematic analysis, it was possible to understand common themes for using a private tutor during A-Level studies. These matched with expectations, with most participants looking for additional support outside the classroom, wanting better grades and not following what has happened in class. It is worth noting that two specific subjects were mentioned repeatedly: maths and physics. These were not the only subjects listed as motivations, chemistry and computer science were also included in these responses. This would imply that private tutoring is more prevalent for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects which are often perceived as more challenging. These subjects have also increased in student numbers due to their importance in future study and careers, potentially increasing the demand for private tutoring in these areas.

Several positive outcomes of private tutoring were identified by participants. These were all understandable; private tutoring provides additional assistance outside of mainstream schooling hence students feeling better supported, having an improved understanding of the subject, and ultimately receiving better grades. Some participants also noted that improved confidence was a positive outcome of private tutoring, possibly due to the extra encouragement received from someone other than their parent or classroom teacher. This tallies with the responses about why private tutoring produced these perceived positive outcomes. The most common reason was the personalised lessons with the tutor able to focus on the needs of the student rather than a whole class. This is connected to the ability to ask questions which was also listed as a reason for tutoring to provide benefits.

Participants in this study provided some negative outcomes, although not as many as the positives discussed above. Multiple students said that private tutoring was time consuming, with cost being the next most common negative aspect of tuition. Students also mentioned that the tutor could make things more confusing, particularly when they contradicted what had been taught in school lessons. Some also felt that their tutor had not met their expectations, although little additional detail was provided to explain this outcome. Stress was cited as the main reason for negative impacts of private tutoring, with participants noting that the additional lessons alongside their schoolwork and extra-curricular activities made life incredibly busy and sometimes overwhelming. Others noted an over-reliance on their tutor, in some cases this seemed to affect their approach to classroom lessons. It is also possible that a poor relationship between the tutor and pupil contributed to stress and mixed feelings about the tutoring experience.

This study has implications for schools, parents, and students. Students clearly find the adjustment to A-Level studies challenging and generally feel their experience of this phase of education is negative. The transition to a larger emphasis on independent study, with the additional organisational skills, time-management and self-reliance required presenting challenges to even the most confident students. For students with mental health issues and/or live in competitive environments (e.g., urban regions) these additional challenges can feel insurmountable. However, the results from this study show that tutors have the potential to provide a solution for these students. In offering one to one, tailored support, private tutoring can focus on the needs of the student and build confidence in both students and their support network. Tutors can provide the additional skills required to adapt to independent study and help in overcoming the extra challenges that students with mental health issues face, particularly when teachers are unable to do so due to large class sizes and time constraints. As such, schools and parents should consider the use of private tutors in supporting students who are struggling with the transition to A-Level studies or who have additional needs as part of their education.

### **Limitations**

In drawing conclusions from these results, it is important to note that the sample size is very small. With 26 survey participants and three subsequent interviews it would be difficult to generalise. Such a small sample size has meant the analysis has remained quite

simple, akin to similar introductory studies such as Cone (2021), seeking to understand if there is a relationship between private tutoring and student perceptions rather than establishing exactly what the nature of that relationship is.

## Conclusions

While it may be difficult to draw general conclusions from this research, it has furthered the understanding of non-academic impacts of private tutoring. Student perceptions of A-Level studies are largely negative and private tutoring could be considered a possible solution to this problem. This is of interest to teachers, school leaders and governments when seeking to address the emotional wellbeing of students in post-16 education. In general, students felt positively about their tutoring experience and many commented that they had benefited from the additional support. Nevertheless, in a system that already puts a large amount of pressure on students to perform, it is important to be cautious before adding in extra study time and potentially more stress. Private tutoring can make students feel better about their education; they receive additional support, personalised learning and improved confidence. In using private tuition, consideration should be given to the duration, frequency style of the lessons, and financial burden particularly when wanting to limit any negative outcomes of tutoring.

Consistent with findings from previous studies, this present research shows that the availability and affordability of private tuition can create an unfair disadvantage for students from less affluent backgrounds and/or rural areas (Bray & Kwo, 2013; Zhang & Bray, 2020b). Therefore, based on these findings, the paper argues a need for governments to consider non-academic impacts of private tutoring, as well as issues related to the distribution of educational resources and provision of equal educational opportunities for all students. In addition, as mentioned above, since urban students are more likely to receive private tuition than their rural counterparts, mainly due to demand and availability of face-to-face tuition, consideration should be given to relationships between socioeconomic status and private tutoring in urban contexts.

In summary, it is strikingly apparent that the growth of private tutoring has and continues to be an influencing factor in the education, economics, and societies of the UK, Europe, and beyond. Therefore, as the private tutoring industry grows further in popularity, it is also clear that this area of education requires further research. Specifically, more studies need to be carried out to examine the role of private tuition in processes of societal and environmental change, as well as the factors that influence its efficacy. The impact of tutoring on students' family lives and the wider society, for example, are often overlooked by researchers. Understanding both the academic and non-academic impacts of private tutoring on students is required for properly establishing if the use of private tutors is worth the time, cost and effort for schools, parents, and students.

## Statements and declarations

The authors did not receive any financial support or have relationships that may pose conflict of interest.

All procedures performed in the study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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## Appendix A: Online survey questions

1. Year group
2. A-Level subjects studying/studied:
3. Where are you studying your A-levels or did you study your A-levels?
4. How do you feel about your A-level experience?
5. How would you describe your emotional wellbeing?
6. Give three words to describe how you feel about your A-level experience.

7. Have you used a private tutor at any point in the past two years? (A private tutor is someone who provides one to one or small group lessons on a regular basis. They may be paid or provide these services for free.)
8. What were your reasons for choosing to use a private tutor?
9. How long did you use a private tutor for?
10. Were the lessons online or in person?
11. How often did you have lessons with your tutor?
12. On a scale of 1 - 10 how well do you feel your tutor helped your academic performance?
13. On a scale of 1 - 10 how did using a private tutor affect your emotional wellbeing?
14. On a scale of 1-10 how useful did you feel private tutoring was?
15. What were the positive effects of your time with a private tutor? Please provide as much detail as possible about what was positive.
16. What do you think caused these positive outcomes?
17. What were the negative effects of your time with a private tutor? Please provide as much detail as possible about what was negative.
18. What do you think caused these negative outcomes?
19. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about private tutoring?
20. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. To further understand the impacts of private tutoring on wellbeing we would like to contact participants for a follow up interview. If you would like to be considered for a follow up interview, please put your full name and email address below. Note that this does not guarantee that you will be contacted, and you have the right to withdraw your consent for an interview at any time.

## **Appendix B: Semi-structured interview questions**

Reminder: Begin the interview with a reminder that the participant should only share what they feel comfortable with and they have the right to terminate the interview at any time.

1. Tell me about why you used a private tutor.
2. What did you hope to gain from using a private tutor? What were the reasons you used one in the first place?
3. How would you describe your tutoring experience?
4. What were the positive outcomes of using a private tutor? How did this make you feel?
5. What were the negative aspects of using a private tutor? How did these make you feel?
6. How would you describe your emotional wellbeing?
7. How did tutoring affect your wellbeing? Why do you think that was?
8. How often did you have lessons with your tutor?
9. What format did the lessons take? Were these online or in-person? Was that through choice or necessity?

10. Would you recommend using a private tutor to other students? Why do you think that is?

The exact phrasing of the questions will be adapted to suit the participant. If the participant hones in on a particular theme or outcome that is of interest to the researcher then further questions may be asked about this.

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