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International Student Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships Affecting Academic Motivation: A Case Study of One University

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Abstract

This study investigates international students' perceptions of teacher-student relationships and their impact on academic motivation at a Chinese university in China. Drawing on qualitative, in-depth interviews with five international master's students from diverse backgrounds, the research explores how relational and pedagogical factors shape student motivation within a cross-cultural higher education context. Thematic analysis revealed that approachability, emotional support, interactive teaching methods, and constructive feedback are central to fostering positive teacher-student relationships and enhancing motivation. Participants highlighted the importance of teachers' openness, cultural sensitivity, and willingness to engage students as individuals, which contributed to a supportive and engaging learning environment. While external motivators such as grades and career prospects were acknowledged, the quality of teacher-student relationships was found to play a uniquely influential role in sustaining motivation and academic engagement. The findings highlight the need for culturally responsive teaching practices and relationship-building strategies in international education settings. The study contributes to the understanding of how teacher-student relationships affect international students' academic experiences and offers practical recommendations for educators and institutions seeking to enhance student motivation and success in multicultural university environments.

Introduction

Teacher-student relationships represent one of the most critical dimensions of educational success, serving as the foundation for effective learning environments that foster student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. Hayes et al. (2006) demonstrated that teachers' classroom practices and their interactions with students have the greatest effect on student learning outcomes. McDonald Connor et al. (2005) further examined re-

search indicating that teachers' regard for their students, their responsiveness to student questions and interests, the emotional climate of the classroom, and their expectations have all been significantly related to student achievement. These expectations developed by teachers potentially influence their approach to students, which can ultimately affect the performance of those students.

A substantial body of contemporary research provides compelling evidence that strong and supportive relationships between teachers and students are fundamental to the healthy development of all students in educational

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settings (Birch & Ladd, 1998).Recent meta-analytic studies have reinforced these findings, with Roorda et al. (2017) conducting a comprehensive analysis of 189 studies involving 249,198 students from preschool to high school, revealing that positive teacher-student relationships significantly predict student achievement through enhanced engagement. Additionally, Wang (2024) found that teacher-student relationships significantly and positively predicted academic adjustment among Chinese students, with the relationship indirectly influencing academic outcomes through improved school attitudes and resilience.

The theoretical foundations underlying teacher-student relationships draw from multiple psychological frameworks. Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a comprehensive motivational framework that emphasizes three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When teachers satisfy these needs through supportive interactions, students experience enhanced intrinsic motivation and academic engagement. Bureau et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating that teacher support for these psychological needs significantly predicts students' self-determined motivation, with relatedness, the need for connection and belonging, emerging as particularly crucial in educational contexts.

Social cognitive theory further illuminates the mechanisms through which teacher-student interactions influence learning outcomes. Bandura's framework emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and observational learning within the classroom environment (Owunna et al., 2025). The research has shown that students who engage in positive social interactions with teachers demonstrate improved comprehension, retention rates, and overall academic performance compared to those experiencing limited social engagement.

Attachment theory also provides valuable insights into teacher-student relationships, particularly in understanding how early relational experiences influence students' capacity for forming connections with educators. Tamplin's research suggests that positive teacher-student relationships can serve as corrective attachment experiences, potentially enhancing students' intrinsic academic motivation and overall educational outcomes (Tamplin, n.d.). In classroom contexts, teachers who demonstrate warmth, consistency, and responsiveness can provide the secure base that students need to explore and engage with learning materials confidently.

Recent empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the multifaceted impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student motivation and achievement. One

study found that among 1,058 Chinese university students, teacher-student relationships directly and positively associated with academic engagement, with the relationship also working indirectly through perceived social support and reduced academic pressure(X. Liu, 2024). Similarly, research conducted in Indonesian secondary schools revealed that interaction models emphasizing collaborative learning and personalized feedback significantly enhanced student participation and motivation, with strategies such as the Socratic Method and Flipped Classroom demonstrating 25% and 30% increases in student engagement metrics, respectively(Sinaga, 2024). The significance of emotional support within teacher-student relationships has received increasing attention from researchers. A 2024 study from an educational psychology perspective found that teacher emotional support significantly enhances students' academic outcomes by creating supportive learning environments, improving motivation, and reducing stress (Chen & Huang, 2024). This finding aligns with the broader understanding that positive relationships serve as protective factors for students at risk of academic failure while simultaneously promoting success among all learners (Novi, n.d.).

Cross-Cultural Perspectives and International Student Experiences

The importance of teacher-student relationships becomes particularly pronounced in cross-cultural educational contexts, where international students navigate both academic and cultural challenges. Research by Nolan et al. (2024) demonstrated that teachers can have substantial impacts on cross-cultural student interactions through purposeful learning design, with culturally aware approaches significantly increasing intercultural engagement compared to generic teaching methods. This finding is particularly relevant for international students who may face unique challenges related to language barriers, cultural differences, and adaptation to new educational systems.

In the context of Chinese higher education, where international student enrollment has grown substantially, the quality of teacher-student relationships has emerged as a critical factor in student success. A 2024 study examining Pakistani students learning Chinese as a second language found that teacher-student relationships positively and significantly influenced language learning outcomes, with student self-efficacy serving as a mediating factor (An et al., 2024). The research revealed that when teachers demonstrated empathy, treated students fairly, offered praise, and provided encouragement, students experienced enhanced motivation and improved learning outcomes.

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The multicultural classroom environment presents both opportunities and challenges for developing effective teacher-student relationships. European research on multicultural classrooms has identified language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and institutional support as key factors influencing the success of international students (Bakay, 2023). Teachers who demonstrate cultural awareness and adapt their instructional approaches to accommodate diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds are more successful in building positive relationships with international students (Bakay, 2023).

Contemporary Research Developments

Recet research has expanded our understanding of the mechanisms through which teacher-student relationships influence student motivation and achievement. A 2024 study by Lan et al. examining Chinese university students found that perceived teacher support had the strongest impact on student learning engagement, with teacher-student interaction and learning motivation serving as significant predictors of academic success. This finding underscores the importance of teachers' supportive behaviors in creating environments that promote active learning and academic achievement.

The role of classroom interaction strategies has also received significant attention in contemporary research. A systematic literature review by Wang (2017) found that teachers' positive strategies, including emotional support, instructional guidance, and collaborative learning approaches, significantly increased students' behavioral and social engagement while also influencing emotional engagement in classroom settings. These findings highlight the importance of teachers' intentional use of relationship-building strategies to create engaging learning environments.

Research has also demonstrated the bidirectional nature of teacher-student relationships, with teacher motivation and well-being significantly influencing their capacity to build positive relationships with students. Ryan & Deci (2020) noted that teachers themselves are impacted by controlling mandates, institutional pressures, and leadership styles, which can affect their ability to provide the autonomy-supportive environments that enhance student motivation. This recognition has led to increased attention to teacher professional development and institutional support systems that enable educators to build and maintain positive relationships with students.

Implications for Educational Practice

The extensive research on teacher-student relationships has significant implications for educational practice, par-

ticularly in diverse and international educational contexts. The findings suggest that teachers who prioritize relationship-building, demonstrate cultural sensitivity, and employ student-centered pedagogical approaches are more likely to create environments that support student motivation and achievement. Recent research by Liu et al. (2025) emphasized that positive teacher-student relationships serve as pathways to sustainable learning, with psychological insights revealing that supportive relationships and instructional practices contribute to enhanced student motivation and self-efficacy.

Drawing on this extensive literature, there remains a need for continued research into student-teacher relationships and their effects on student motivation and academic achievement, particularly in the context of Chinese higher education and international student populations. The unique cultural and linguistic challenges faced by international students studying in China create specific dynamics that warrant detailed investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: first, to examine the relationships between students and teachers in a Chinese university context, focusing on international students from different countries and educational backgrounds who are pursuing master's degrees in comparative education; and second, to investigate the effects of these relationships on student motivation.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore international students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships and how these relationships influence their academic motivation within the context of one Chinese university. Specifically, the research aims to identify and analyze the key relational and pedagogical factors that shape international students' motivation and engagement in their graduate studies. By focusing on the lived experiences of five international master's students from diverse backgrounds, the study seeks to provide insights into the interpersonal dynamics and classroom practices that contribute to or hinder student motivation in a cross-cultural educational setting. Drawing on these perspectives, the study addresses the following research question: What are the international students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships affecting student motivation in one Chinese university? The findings are intended to contribute to the broader field of teacher education and international higher education by informing strategies for building positive, supportive, and culturally responsive teacher-student relationships.

Methodology

Research Design

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This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the factors within student-teacher relationships that affect the motivation of international graduate students. Specifically, the research focused on five international students enrolled in master's degree programs at a Chinese university in Beijing. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena, such as interpersonal dynamics and motivation, as they allow for rich, detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An inductive thematic analysis approach was employed to identify key themes and patterns emerging from the data, enabling a nuanced understanding of the student-teacher relationship in a cross-cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Sample

A convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit five international students pursuing graduate studies (master's degrees) at a university in Beijing, China. The participants represented diverse cultural backgrounds and were enrolled in various education-related courses, including Chinese language classes. This sample size, while small, allowed for in-depth exploration of individual perspectives, which is a hallmark of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The selection of participants was based on their direct experience with cross-cultural student-teacher relationships in the Chinese higher education context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This method enabled participants to share their experiences and perceptions in detail, while allowing the researcher to probe for clarification and deeper understanding. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted in a private setting to ensure comfort and confidentiality. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by researcher notes. The interview protocol focused on participants' experiences with their teachers, the nature of student-teacher relationships, and the perceived impact of these relationships on their motivation and academic achievement. This approach aligns with best practices for qualitative research in educational settings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014).

Data Analysis

The data analysis for the study employed thematic analysis following the systematic framework outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process began with transcription, where audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into English to ensure accuracy and complete-

ness of the data. Following transcription, a familiarization phase was conducted in which transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure thorough familiarity with the data content and to identify initial patterns and areas of interest. The coding phase involved identifying and coding segments that were relevant to the research questions, with repeating ideas and themes being grouped into categories to allow for the emergence of sub-themes. This inductive approach enabled the data to guide the development of themes rather than imposing predetermined categories. Subsequently, theme development was undertaken, where broader constructs were developed from the coded data, which were then used to answer the research questions and provide meaningful insights into the student-teacher relationship factors affecting motivation.

The final phase involved narrative construction, where a coherent narrative was constructed that connects the various categories and interprets the findings considering existing literature and theoretical frameworks. To ensure the rigor of the analysis, coding decisions and theme development were meticulously documented in an audit trail to maintain transparency and accountability throughout the analytical process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose and procedures. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing all data. The researcher was sensitive to participants' well-being, ensuring that no harm or discomfort resulted from their involvement. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for educational research (Sharp, 2003).

Findings

This section presents the key findings from the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with five international graduate students enrolled in master's degree programs at a university in Beijing, China. Drawing on participants' diverse backgrounds and experiences, the analysis explores how international students perceive and experience student-teacher relationships, and how these relationships influence their academic motivation. The findings are organized around major themes that emerged from the data, providing insights into the interpersonal and pedagogical factors that shape motivation and engagement in a cross-cultural higher education context.

Approachability and Support

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All respondents consistently highlighted the importance of having approachable, friendly, and supportive teachers for fostering positive student-teacher relationships. Respondent 1 described their Chinese language teacher as "always friendly" and emphasized, "She is more open. I would say close relationship. Because they are much freer to ask questions and she is more open." Respondent 2 echoed this sentiment, noting that their teacher was "friendly and helpful, give a lot of advice and guidance," and often made students smile, which contributed to a comfortable learning environment. Most participants perceived their teachers more as approachable friends than as distant authority figures. Respondent 1 reflected, "It is much more inspiring to learn from a friend. The teacher is more approachable. I treat my teacher as my friend...when the teachers are open and become so friendly, and that is a positive-teacher relationship." This dynamic allowed students to express ideas freely and seek help, enhancing their sense of belonging and engagement in the classroom.

Teaching Techniques and Classroom Interaction

Interactive and student-centered teaching methods were identified as key to building strong student-teacher relationships and sustaining motivation. Respondent 1 appreciated that their teacher encouraged students to sit in a circle, promoting discussion and allowing everyone to express their opinions after reading assigned materials. Respondent 4 valued teachers who involved all students in classroom activities, making the class "lively and competitive." The negative impact of traditional, lecture-dominated approaches was also noted. Respondent 1 remarked, "If the teacher stands in the front, we listen. I do not think people like this." Respondent 5 added that when teachers dominate the class and students remain passive, "the class is such a boring place, and it is not convenient and beneficial to the students." Conversely, Respondent 3 observed that when professors provide support, "you can do the assignment better and better...teaching method does affect the student-teacher relationship. It effects on motivation, achievement, performance."

Motivation and Engagement

The quality of the student-teacher relationship was directly linked to student motivation and willingness to engage. Respondent 1 described a transformation in their attitude towards a course, stating, "In his previous class, in the first week, I do not really like the course subject. But the way he presented and the relationship and the way he handles the lectures change my mindset. In the end of the semester, I am highlighting the subjects...this relationship gives motivations to do and to start now readings etc....because before that I was a very bad reader and a very bad writer. But in the end, I was very motivated." Respondent 4 reinforced this connection, explaining that without a positive relationship, students lack motivation and are less likely to commit to the course, which can result in poor performance. Respondent 3 also noted that having a good relationship with the teacher made them feel better and more motivated to complete homework and follow instructions promptly.

Academic Achievement and Feedback

Positive relationships not only motivated students but also boosted their academic confidence and performance, especially through feedback and support. Respondent 1 explained that having a good relationship with the teacher led to increased confidence when submitting assignments, as they felt assured about the outcomes. Respondent 5 highlighted the importance of feedback, stating, "Learning is through getting feedback from professor and I can upgrade my knowledge and ways of understanding. As a student, we need help, feedback, comments from our experienced professor, and that is called relationship." However, Respondent 5 also pointed out that poor relationships could negatively impact academic achievement, as teachers may be less willing to help. Respondent 2 similarly observed that good relationships can increase student performance, while negative relationships can lead to disengagement from studies.

Attendance and External Motivators

The influence of student-teacher relationships on attendance was mixed among participants. Some, such as Respondent 1, indicated that attendance was primarily driven by institutional requirements, stating, "I go to class because it is what I must do. I go to class, or my attendance has nothing to do with the relationship with student and teacher." Respondent 5 agreed, emphasizing the importance of attending class to gain knowledge, regardless of their feelings toward the teacher. However, others, like Respondent 3 and Respondent 2, indicated that a positive relationship could enhance attendance and motivation. Respondent 3 shared that having a good relationship with the teacher made them feel better and more motivated to do homework, while Respondent 2 estimated that most students who attend class regularly can build relationships with teachers. External motivators such as grades, scholarships, and future career prospects were also acknowledged as important factors influencing motivation and attendance. Respondent 1 noted that aside from good relationships, "grade, employment opportunity, scholarship and so on" also played a role in motivating them.

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Overall, the findings reveal that approachability, support, and interactive teaching techniques are central to building positive student-teacher relationships. These relationships, in turn, foster motivation, engagement, and academic achievement by creating a supportive and participatory classroom environment. While institutional requirements and external motivators also influence attendance and effort, the study suggest that the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching play a uniquely crucial role in shaping students' academic experiences and outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce and extend the current understanding of the critical role that student-teacher relationships play in shaping student motivation and academic achievement, particularly within international and cross-cultural higher education contexts. Consistent with prior research, this study demonstrates that positive, approachable, and supportive student-teacher relationships are central to fostering student motivation. Participants described how teachers who are friendly, empathetic, and responsive create environments conducive to engagement and learning. This aligns with the broader literature, which highlights that emotionally supportive teacher-student interactions enhance students' intrinsic motivation and sense of belonging (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Roorda et al., 2011). In international settings, where students may face additional cultural and linguistic barriers, the importance of relational support is amplified (Wang, 2024). The current study's findings validate that when students perceive their teachers as approachable and invested in their success, they are more likely to participate actively, seek feedback, and persist in their studies.

The results also emphasize the significance of interactive and student-centered teaching techniques in strengthening student-teacher relationships and sustaining motivation. Participants consistently favored classrooms where teachers encouraged discussion, debate, and the sharing of ideas, rather than relying solely on traditional lecture-based methods. This preference is mirrored in the literature, which identifies curriculum and teaching innovation as essential for promoting engagement and learning outcomes in higher education (Bureau et al., 2022). Active learning strategies and participatory classroom environments not only facilitate knowledge acquisition but also build trust and rapport between students and teachers, further motivating students to excel.

The study's findings corroborate the view that positive student-teacher relationships are associated with higher academic achievement. Students reported increased confidence in their academic work and greater willingness to seek help and feedback when they had strong relationships with their teachers. This is consistent with self-determination theory, which posits that relatedness and support from significant others, such as teachers, are fundamental to students' academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Recent empirical studies in China and other contexts have found that teacher support and constructive feedback directly contribute to improved academic performance and adjustment among university students (Wang, 2024).

While the influence of student-teacher relationships on class attendance was mixed in this study, with some students motivated by institutional requirements and others by relational factors, the results reflect the complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators in higher education. The literature suggests that while external motivators such as grades, scholarships, and career opportunities are important, the quality of student-teacher relationships can enhance or diminish their impact on student engagement and persistence (Mittelmeier et al., 2022; Roorda et al., 2017). The present study supports the notion that relational factors, when combined with external motivators, create a more holistic and sustainable foundation for student motivation.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the impact of student-teacher relationships on the motivation and academic achievement of international master's students in Education at a university in Beijing. Drawing on both thematic analysis of interview data and current scholarly literature, the findings confirm that positive, approachable, and supportive relationships between students and teachers are fundamental to fostering motivation, engagement, and academic success. The results indicate that when teachers employ interactive, student-cantered teaching strategies, and provide timely feedback, students are more likely to participate actively, develop confidence, and achieve higher academic outcomes. While institutional requirements and external motivators such as grades and scholarships also influence student behavior, the quality of the student-teacher relationship remains a central factor in shaping students' attitudes and performance. These findings are consistent with self-determination theory, which highlights relatedness and support as essential for intrinsic motivation and learning. Furthermore, the study highlights that in multicultural and internationalized educational settings, relational pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching are especially important. International students, who often face unique linguistic and cultural challenges, benefit significantly from teachers who are empathetic, accessible, and willing to adapt their teaching.

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Implications

The findings have significant implications for teaching practices in international education settings. Teachers working with international students should prioritize relationship-building activities and adopt student-centered pedagogical approaches that encourage interaction and collaboration (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2025; Tran, 2020) The emphasis on approachability and support suggests that teachers need to actively demonstrate cultural sensitivity and create inclusive classroom environments where students feel safe to express themselves (Bywater, 2024). Educational institutions should implement professional development programs that focus on building teachers' relationship-building competence, particularly in multicultural contexts (Borremans et al., 2024; X. Wang, 2023). The study suggests that teachers benefit from training in culturally responsive teaching methods and cross-cultural communication skills to better serve international student populations (Bureau et al., 2022).

Universities enrolling international students should develop comprehensive support systems that recognize the critical role of teacher-student relationships in student success (Tran, 2020). This includes creating smaller class sizes that facilitate meaningful interactions, providing language support services, and establishing mentorship programs that connect international students with culturally aware faculty members (Zhang, 2023). Institutions should also consider implementing policies that encourage teachers to engage in relationship-building activities beyond traditional classroom instruction, such as office hours, informal conversations, and culturally inclusive campus events. The study's findings suggest that these interactions are crucial for building trust and rapport with international students.

The results indicate that teacher education programs should incorporate specific training on building positive relationships with students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Borremans et al., 2024). This includes developing competencies in cross-cultural communication, understanding different learning styles, and adapting teaching methods to meet the needs of international students. Teacher education programs should also emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence and mindfulness in teaching, as these qualities have been shown to enhance teacher-student relationship quality (X. Wang, 2023). The study supports the need for ongoing professional development that helps teachers reflect on their relational practices and develop strategies for building connections with all students, regardless of their cultural background (Roorda et al., 2017).

Further research should explore student-teacher relationships across different disciplines, institutions, and cultural contexts, using both qualitative and quantitative methods for broader generalizability. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts would provide valuable insights into the universality and cultural specificity of teacher-student relationship factors (Xu et al., 2023). Longitudinal studies could examine how positive student-teacher relationships influence academic trajectories, retention, and career success among international students.

Declarations

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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