



Intercultural teacher–student relationships: a qualitative study of students on 2+2 tertiary joint programs

Li Bai¹ · Ying Xian Wang¹

Received: 1 August 2020 / Accepted: 3 February 2021 / Published online: 25 March 2021
© The Australian Association for Research in Education, Inc. 2021

Abstract

Teacher–student relationship (TSR) is, despite its importance, an under-researched area in higher education, and this is particularly the case with TSR between international students and their teachers at the host institutions. Past research has found that social integration plays an important role in university students’ academic performance and in international students’ satisfaction with their overseas experience. By using rich interview data, this study examined the TSRs Chinese international students experienced on 2+2 tertiary joint programs between Chinese institutions and an Australian university. Three major themes emerged from this study: Students’ experiences of TSR at their Chinese home institutions, their experiences of TSR at the Australian university, and the student-initiated reasons for cross-cultural differences. This study contributes to the literature by calling the attention of policy makers and program managers of 2+2 joint programs (and other joint tertiary programs) to the important issues of intercultural communication and intercultural awareness.

Keywords Intercultural teacher–student relationship · Joint tertiary education programs · Chinese international students · Transnational higher education · Intercultural awareness

Introduction

“An important and under-researched” (Hagenauer and Volet 2014, p. 371) topic in higher education is the teacher–student relationship (TSR). According to Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019), only nine empirical research studies that explicitly focus on TSR in higher education could be located. Although there is a large body of studies on

✉ Li Bai
l1.bai@qut.edu.au
Ying Xian Wang
y.wang@qut.edu.au

¹ Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Business and Law, Level 10, Z Block, QUT, Gardens’ Point Campus, 2 George Street, 4000 Brisbane, Australia

faculty–student interaction, they argue that TSR and faculty–student interaction are different in that the latter is only a necessary condition for TSR but does not guarantee the building and quality of TSR. TSR is important because improved TSR may be able to facilitate university retention, students’ motivation and learning outcomes, give university academics a sense of belonging, and enhance university learning and teaching (e.g. Owen and Zwahr-Castro 2007; Sibii 2010; Hagenauer and Volet 2014). While TSR at the university level is an ignored area of research (Hagenauer and Volet 2014), even less explicit attention has been given to the TSR between undergraduate international students and their teachers at the host institutions, despite the large enrolment numbers of undergraduate students at universities of receiving countries (Vu and Doyle 2014).

The unprecedented influx of international students into Western countries such as the United States (the U. S.), the United Kingdom (the U. K.), and Australia makes international education one of the top export earners for these countries (Tran and Vu 2016). Australia, like other popular destinations for international Chinese students, offers multi-faceted benefits. One of these is the opportunity to experience a different culture. As a result, international students’ satisfaction with their overseas experiences is derived not only from receiving high-quality education (Rahimi et al. 2017) but also from feeling a sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995) in the new country, a deep-level social interaction with the local culture and local people. Teachers are one of those groups of people with whom international students have most social contact, and quality interactions with teachers are conducive to TSR building (Karpouza and Emvalotis 2019) which will in turn benefit students’ learning and adjustment (Tinto 1993). Given that limited research has explicitly focussed on international students’ experiences with their host university teachers, this study intended to fill the research gap by examining the teacher–student relationships experienced by Chinese international students studying on 2+2 partnership programs.

Since the turn of the century, China has established more than 800 joint education programs with foreign universities at the bachelor and above level (MOE 2019). In Australia alone, the joint program numbered 108 in 2018 (Australian Government 2018). With these joint programs, students combined their home study and overseas study, and 2+2 is one of the most popular modes of collaboration where students spend two years in each partner institution to complete their degree. In our study, the student participants of such programs compared and contrasted their experiences of the TSRs at their home institutions in China and the Australian host university. By examining their experiences of the cross-cultural TSRs, this study contributes to the literature by calling for the attention of policy makers and program managers in institutions holding present and future 2+2 joint programs (and other joint tertiary programs) to enhance students’ overseas learning experiences by developing their intercultural awareness and competence.

Literature review

As the purpose of this study was to compare and contrast participants’ experiences of the teacher–student relationships at the students’ home universities in China and the host institution in Australia, the literature review provides a cross-cultural

discussion of some major conceptions of TSR from the perspectives of how they are perceived in the Chinese and the Western traditions. Also reviewed is some literature on workplace policies adopted by Australian and Chinese universities which may also have a bearing on the TSRs practised in the two systems.

Perceptions of teachers in Chinese traditions

Teachers as parents and moral models

This can mean two things: one is students' respect for teachers, and the other is the responsibility of teachers towards students (Wang and Du 2014). In the Chinese language, there is an old saying: "Being a teacher for only one day entitles one to life-long respect from the students that befits his father" (Hu 2001, p. 34). Teachers in China have been traditionally regarded with respect because they are believed to be bearers and authorities of knowledge that has been passed down from ancient saints and scholars such as Confucius. Many Chinese classrooms are characterised with teacher-fronted and teacher-centred teaching with students displaying "diligence, dedication and discipline" (Jin and Cortazzi 2008, p. 3). On the other hand, teachers seem to assume parental duties towards their students. They are not only expected to teach students knowledge and skills, but also have the obligation to make sure their students learn and grasp what is taught. In addition, as teachers in China have the responsibility to cultivate students' moral characters and teach them to be morally responsible social beings, most often they need to act as ethical role models to their students (Jin and Cortazzi 2006) so that they befit the society's expectation of them: "*weirenshibiao*" (being a role model to students in moral character). To sum up, a well-regarded teacher in the Chinese culture is expected to *jiaoshuyuren*: not only look after their students' academic achievements but also take care of students' good moral character formation. This notion of teachers has been supported by empirical findings from Chinese university students' perceptions about good (tertiary) teachers (Zhang and Watkins 2007).

Teachers as friends as well as teachers

In the Chinese language, an idiom *Liangshiyiyou* describes a desirable type of teacher who is both a good teacher and a helpful/supportive friend (Yang 2008). Teachers of such kind not only pass on knowledge but also provide their students with moral and emotional support when needed. That explains why the equivalent of *Liangshiyiyou* in English is "mentor". While the hierarchical TSR, especially in the Chinese classroom, seems to be much researched (e.g. Jin and Cortazzi 2008), the TSR denoted by *Liangshiyiyou* has not attracted much research attention, maybe because it emphasises a more equal relationship between adults mostly outside formal educational contexts. However, as China opens up and is increasingly influenced by Western educational ideas, *Liangshiyiyou* has also taken on the meaning of teachers who, instead of assuming a dominant role when dealing with students, especially minors, try to understand and respect their students, treating them as their

equals as well as providing help when needed. Indeed, a random browse of some Chinese universities' codes of conduct shows that *Liangshiyiyou* is the highly promoted TSR in China (e.g. Beijing University 2016; University of International Business and Economics 2018; Renmin University of China 2019).

Perceptions of teachers in Western traditions

Teachers as pastoral carers

In the preface of his book "The Idea of a University", Cardinal Newman (1957) pointed out that a university's primary function is teaching universal knowledge. With teaching as the central mission of a university, teachers should not only teach students academic knowledge, but also provide moral guidance, pastoral care, and mentoring (Newman 1957; Anderson 2010). Taking good care of students and offering them a home away from home was very important for Newman. Following this idea of the university, the English universities adopted the tutor system in which the tutor assumed a role of a caretaker of the students, emphasising more strongly the student and tutor interaction (Deem 2006).

Teachers as facilitators

Inheriting the Socratic dialogic learning tradition, teaching in the Western world encourages students' intellectual input by adopting the inductive teaching method (Holmes 2006). That is, teaching involves eliciting answers from students (knowledge discovery), and the classroom is where interactions such as question raising, debates, and collaborative problem-solving happen (Holmes 2004). Thus, classroom activities should be interactive, collaborative, and student-centred, and students are expected to actively participate in their own learning (Holms 2006). As developing students' analytical and critical thinking skills for lifelong learning is the ultimate goal of education, assessment of students is more than just knowledge regurgitation, but includes a great deal of reading, writing, and oral presentations. The relationship between teachers and students in line with such a tradition is one where teachers are facilitators of students' learning, and students are expected to be active agents of their own learning (Holmes 2006).

Workplace policies affecting TSRs in Australian and Chinese universities

University academics in the West and China are operating in different educational systems whose workplace policies may also play a significant role in shaping TSRs currently practised. In Australia, as in other Western countries, teachers receive special induction and training about their rights and their responsibilities. In addition, teachers in every Australian university can access a whole raft of university policy statements, including employee enterprise agreements about rights and responsibilities (e.g. Melbourne University 2009; Monash University 2020). While academics are encouraged to understand their rights and assert them when necessary, they are

also expected to be accountable for their conduct, since Australian universities like other institutions in the West are functioning in an “audit society” or “audit culture” where personal and institutional accountability is accorded paramount importance (Shore 2008). To exercise accountable TSR in Australia’s universities, academics must follow the set code of conduct and maintain professional boundaries in their dealings and communications with students. For example, university teachers are warned, among other things, to keep an appropriate physical and emotional distance from students, use university email accounts to communicate with students and avoid using social media or personal phone or contact details, and avoid contacting students after hours, and leave pastoral care to those who have been allocated such a duty (Monarch University 2020).

In contrast with Australian universities whose policies about teachers’ behaviour towards students have a good proportion focussing on preventing possible risks in TSR, statements made by universities in China on their teachers’ responsibilities and code of conduct emphasise building and maintaining an emotionally close TSR. The common rhetoric used by China’s universities include dedicate tirelessly to students, genuinely love and care for students, and be students’ good teachers and helpful friends (e.g. Beijing University 2016; Renmin University of China 2019; University of International Trade and Business 2018). The pervasive use of the language echoing the formal guidelines from China’s Education Ministry for university teachers (MOE 2012) shows that the dual role of a teacher as a parent or a friend is officially expected and endorsed. However, such dual role may be considered as boundary violation in the Australian educational context (Graham, Bahr, Truscott & Powell 2018) because engaging in a dual role with their students is outside a teacher’s primary professional relationship.

Methodology

Research context

This research was conducted at an Australian university which has joint 2+2 programs with a number of Chinese institutions. Most of these joint programs between the Australian university and Chinese universities are business-oriented, that is, students enrolled in the programs are business students from Chinese partner institutions. A 2+2 program in this study refers to a joint program between universities from two different countries, in this case, between China and Australia. The structure of these programs is that students spend two years being prepared in English language and disciplinary foundation courses in China before they enter the Australian host university to continue their studies in the remaining two years in a chosen business discipline. The credits they have earned at the Chinese institutions from the foundation business courses are recognised by the Australian university and count as one-year equivalent of the Australian university’s three-year bachelor’s degree. Depending on whether they need to do a language course at the Australian university as a result of passing or not passing the language proficiency test required for

direct entry, students usually spend 2 or 2.5 years in the Australian host university to complete their bachelor's degree.

Participants

After the ethical clearance was obtained from the Australian host university, email invitations were sent to 2+2 students at the Australian host university with the assistance of the Business School Dean's office. The participants needed to have completed at least one semester of study in their chosen major in the Australian university to be eligible for the study, as the interview questions involved comparisons between various aspects of TSR at the students' home institutions and the Australian host university. A sample question was: "Do you find any differences in the teacher-student relationship between your home institution and the Australian university?" Twenty-two eligible students agreed to participate in the research project and each signed a consent form. Of the 22 students, six were female and 16 male. Eleven were finance majors, six marketing, three accounting, one advertising, and one international business. Twelve were in their third year (final year) and 11 were in their second year in the degree program. They came from four Chinese partner institutions.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative face-to-face interviews were adopted because instead of finding aggregate patterns of the TSRs practised at home and host institutions, this study intended to gain an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences of TSR from the participants' perspectives with "a rich and "thick" description" (Merriam 1998, p. 29). One-to-one interviews allowed the researcher to probe interesting themes that emerged on the spot by asking follow-up questions. In this way, an understanding of the TSR issue from the insiders' perspectives was achieved (Merriam 1998). As some of the interview questions could be sensitive, a focus group interview could lead to unreliable data or the participants' unwillingness to express negative views. In addition, focus group participants are susceptible to group influence. All the above reasons led to the decision to use one-to-one interviews as the most effective way to elicit information from Chinese international students to address the research questions.

As the study examined Chinese students' perceptions of the teacher-student relationship, the interview questions focussed on similarities and differences in TSRs between the Chinese and the Australian universities as experienced by students on their 2+2 joint programs. Due to the different meanings of "teacher" in Chinese (Cen 2013), the teachers we focussed on when asking the interview questions were academic staff. A semi-structured 45–60-minute one-to-one interview was conducted with each participant at one of the researchers' offices. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese for ease of communication and capture of nuances of meaning. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic data analysis was adopted in analysing the interview transcripts, following Creswell's (2008) qualitative data analysis model. First, we read through the

transcripts and divided it into text segments guided by the interview questions. A code label was assigned to each segment, using the interviewee's words or a collection of commonly used phrases. For example, one of the interview questions was what is your experience of TSRs in your home university and the Australian university? The participants compared and contrasted the TSRs in the two institutions. At this stage, the preliminary codes from students' responses included not only their general comments about the differences in closeness, but also the reasons that they believed could explain these differences such as class size, sharing the same language and culture, and teacher's young age. We examined these codes derived from students' answers to the above interview question by listing them to check overlap and redundancy. We eliminated the redundant codes and collapsed similar codes so that the many codes we constructed at the early stage were narrowed down to a broader theme: Students' general perceptions about the TSRs. Second, we examined the new list of code words to determine whether these codes recorded common themes and recurring patterns. Finally, we read all the transcripts again to make sure that themes were appropriate, and no text segments were overlooked.

Findings

Our interview questions focussed mainly on the participants' experiences of the differences and similarities in teacher–student relationship at their home institutions and the Australian host university. Three major themes emerged from the interviews: students' experiences of TSRs in China, students' experiences of TSRs in Australia, and the reasons that students offered for the different TSRs across the two systems. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the participants' identity.

Experiences of TSRs in the Chinese universities

The overall TSR depicted by 15 participants from all four Chinese universities was "close" (the actual word used by quite a few participants) compared with that at the Australian university. However, this closeness was felt differently by different students. Four students from one university highlighted the friend-like close relationship: "I feel that at home the teachers are more like friends, and we are closer. Here [in Australia], though, the teachers have nothing to do with you after class, but this is how it works in Australia" (Guo). Six participants from three universities noted the rapport that was established by their Chinese teachers with students at home: "They [Chinese teachers] would remember every student; they would know your name. This is not the case with Australian teachers unless you go to a lot of consultations with them" (Niu). The rapport was not only reciprocal but solid, reflecting a kind of interpersonal relationship that is mostly found in a close-knit community: "The teachers and students' knowledge about each other was beyond names. The teachers knew well what a certain student was like" (Zhang). Other participants' descriptions about this closeness sounded like parent–child relationship: "I feel that Chinese teachers show more concern [to

their students]. They would tell you to work hard. Teachers in Australia are more relaxed and actually do not care that much about you” (Jin). This corroborates some students’ conceptions of good university teachers in Zhang and Watkins (2007) and Liu (2020): showing love to their students. Jin, however, also commented that too much care would put pressure on students. This pressure derived from the teachers’ parental role was negatively felt by Ma: “At home, some teachers could get impatient and scold you before they answered your questions: ‘Why didn’t you listen attentively in class?’” (Ma). Shen supported Ma’s remark about the power relation between teachers and students in China and concluded: “So, as a student, you can rarely become a good friend with your teachers” (Shen).

The above observations from the participants seem to indicate that generally Chinese students felt close to their teachers at home institutions. Students found it easier to approach and interact with their Chinese teachers than their Australian counterparts. However, sometimes a tone of power imbalance was embedded in this closeness: Students could be treated as dependent minors instead of independent social beings.

Experiences of TSRs in Australia

Participants’ experiences of the TSR at the Australian university also varied. Twelve students highlighted the unfamiliarity and formal relationship they had with teachers in their degree program, especially those who taught large lectures: “We are not very familiar with the teachers here [in Australia], not to that extent. We feel they are just teachers” (Xu); “The relationship with an Australia teacher is only limited to the [formal] TSR in that particular course. The relationship ended when we completed the course” (Wen). Wen’s remark reveals an idealised teacher–student relationship in the Chinese cultural tradition: a lifelong one. Teachers who are role models both morally and professionally to students are revered, remembered, and thanked by students even years after the latter have finished study. Although a distance between the students and teachers teaching large classes was also perceived at their home institutions, the feeling of this professional distance from their Australian teachers was more acute: “[In China], even if we had large lectures, the lecturers were willing to answer your questions [immediately after class]. You would not need to make an appointment for the lecturers to answer your questions” (Liu).

Australian teachers’ formal way of interacting with students was perceived as distant by some participants. Interestingly, such negative comments were made mostly by second-year students. In the following quote, Liu depicted how his Australian teachers laid emphasis on their personal space:

The teachers here [in Australia] also said to us: “Do not ring me or send me text messages after class because that is my private time”. That’s why people here all like emails, I think. [They would say] “I won’t leave my personal phone number to you, as I don’t wish you to ring me or text me. Email me if you have any questions”. (Liu)

To other students, though, Australian teachers' manner in dealing with students was business-like, less judgemental and showed an equal TSR. For example, the same student who reported being scolded by his Chinese teacher preferred the way Australian teachers answered his questions: "They would spend what they believe was an appropriate length of time explaining to the students.... They would not care whether you have paid attention or not in class, but just answer your questions" (Ma). The business-like manner of Australian teachers was also revealed in playing their role as a facilitator and learning supporter: "I feel that there is more interaction between teachers and students in class. ... Teachers are all willing to help" (Feng).

By an interesting contrast, seven participants reported positive TSR experiences with tutors in their degree programs and with teachers in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and Diploma programs at the Australian university: "I feel most tutors treat every student equally, no discrimination whatsoever. Whenever you ask them questions, they would always answer you" (Zhang); "In Diploma, we had a very tight class schedule. That is, we had class every day and spent a long time in the teaching building, ... the teachers got along well with us and we were close" (An).

Dissimilar from students' experiences of TSRs at the Chinese universities with "closeness" as the key word, their experiences of TSRs in the Australian context seemed to be more centred around "equality", with EAP and Diploma teachers and tutors being equal and close, and large-lecture teachers in the degree program being equal but distant.

Reported reasons for different experiences of TSRs in China and Australia

While students reported their TSR experiences, they also provided reasons they believed contributed to the various different types of TSR: physical proximity between teachers and students, social communication preferences, class size, and language and culture. Firstly, students from one university reported that the teachers they had most interactions with in their first two years in China were teachers who were "in their 20s and some got married only after we came to Australia" (Jin) and "they lived in the same building [university-provided dormitory building on campus] with us" (Guo). Having no family to look after and living close to students appeared to provide more potential opportunities for a closer TSR. The boarding system in Chinese universities also made students feel they were close to their teachers: "Then [when in China] we ate and lived on campus. If we can't say we were close [affectively], just in terms of physical distance we were closer than here. When we got here, we felt fairly isolated" (Dong). In contrast, Australian lecturers and tutors may live far away from campus and have far less opportunities to mingle with students, and socialising with students outside class is mainly restricted to some university/faculty/school-based events.

Secondly, socialising with students in the Chinese context, according to the participants, could mean that Chinese teachers chat with students on social media and go for a cup of tea with students. Xu recalled the TSR he experienced in China:

Teachers at home were easier to communicate with, and we feel we were closer to them because using social media made it easier to contact the teachers. ... Our class had a WeChat¹ group and our teachers were in the group. (Xu)

What stands out here is that the preferred ways of communication between students and teachers in the Chinese institutions tended to make their interactions more verbal, direct, informal and instantaneous. Chinese students could reach their teachers by phone or WeChat or they could simply drop in their teacher's office: "Before the exam if you had any questions, you could ask the teachers any time. We could text them, send a WeChat message, or ring them. We could get immediate answers, so we would not feel panicky" (Liu). However, Australian teachers in general prefer email communication with students and some participants felt frustrated with the Australian practice: "You can only communicate with Australian teachers [outside class] with email. You may add them as your friend on Facebook, but you get no response. Then you wait for their email reply and it takes ages" (Bai).

Thirdly, class sizes and contact frequency appeared to have played an important role in building teacher–student relationships. It seems that the smaller the class size, the more frequent contact, the more intimate the teacher–student relationship can become: "At our home institution, probably due to small class size, the teacher knew every student. Even after work hours we would contact our teachers and chat with them." (Liu). Supporting Liu's point, Cao contrasted contact frequency between China and Australia: "We had class every day in China. But in Australia, if you choose four courses in one semester, you only have [a total of] eight face-to-face contacts with [all] your teachers in a week: Once with each lecturer and tutor". At Chinese universities, students are usually taught in a roll class of 30–50 students for most subjects as there is no distinction between lectures and tutorials as at Australian universities. In addition, for most compulsory disciplinary subjects, students and teachers meet about four hours or at least twice a week. With class attendance required and limited use of online teaching, a closer relationship between teachers and students seems natural.

That the class size matters was also supported by students' positive comments about their Australian tutors who usually handle a much smaller class: "The only staff [at the Australian university] who have closer relationship with students may be tutors because there are less students in a tutorial. ... Tutors are quite friendly" (Shen). Such a close relationship at the Australian host university was also experienced at the EAP and Diploma programs where there was a small number of students in each class and more frequent face-to-face contact between students and teachers: "In Diploma, there were around 20 students [in our class] and the teachers were very nice. They would remember you even if you did not answer questions [in class]. They remembered us when taking our rolls" (Ouyang).

Fourthly, language and culture were also reported as a contributing factor in the teacher–student interactions. Sharing the same language and culture facilitated

¹ WeChat is a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app developed by Tencent.

the communication between the students and their teachers at the home universities: “With teachers in China, probably because we share the same language, we had a better relationship” (Cao). The quote below is more illustrative of the cultural association:

The teachers in China were closer to students, and chatted more with us. However, Australian teachers just teach, without chatting with you about anything non-academic. ([For example], if you did not pay attention in class, a Chinese teacher would talk with you after class: ‘What was the matter?’, but an Australian teacher usually does not care why you did not pay attention.) ... This is probably because they think differently from us. (He)

Both teachers and students in China accept the concept of teachers as parents. This shared cultural notion makes it appropriate for teachers to care about students’ non-academic or personal matters. Such a parental role as reported here by students was indeed what Chinese teachers felt they were expected to perform as revealed in Wang and Du’s (2014) study. However, such a role may not be expected of teachers in the Australian higher education context: “We only feel they are our teachers; whether they are tutors or professors, they don’t chat with you [about personal stuff] unless you run into those really chatty ones” (Jin).

Discussion

In this study, the Chinese international students on 2+2 Australian–Chinese joint programs reported their experiences about the teacher–student relationships at both their Chinese home universities and Australian host institution. The findings indicate that while in neither the Australian nor the Chinese setting was there a single type of TSR, most students experienced more differences than similarities in cross-cultural TSRs. The reasons behind these differences and similarities seem both contextual and cultural.

Cross-cultural TSRs

The findings show that there is no single type of TSR in either the Chinese institutions or the Australian university. However, most participants experienced some distinct differences in TSR across the two contexts. Our data suggest that TSRs that emerged from this study may be best captured on two-dimensional coordinates: the close-distant dimension and hierarchical-equal dimension (Fig. 1).

Type 1 TSR in the first quadrant stands for that between Chinese students with young Chinese teachers: both close and equal. Type 3 in the same quadrant portrays students’ relationship with their Australian teachers in the Diploma/EAP programs and tutors in their degree program: equal and close although not as close as what the first type describes. Type 2 TSR captures students’ relationship with some Chinese teachers, which is close but can be hierarchical. Type 4 in Quadrant 4 symbolises students’ relationship with their Australian teachers teaching large lectures: equal

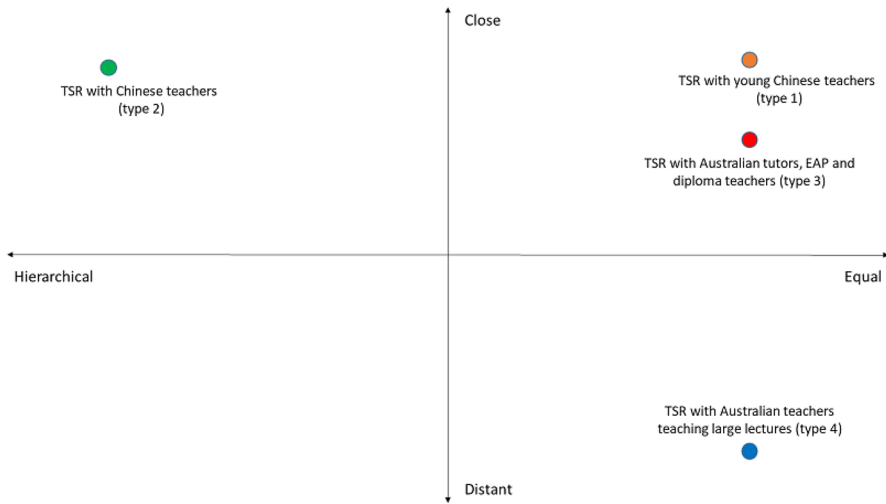


Fig. 1 The different TSRs that emerged from the interviews

but can be distant. It seems that the TSRs with Chinese teachers are more along the closeness dimension, whereas those with Australian teachers sit more along the equality dimension. The diagrammatical representation of various TSRs found in this study echoes most of the TSRs discussed in the literature review: the teacher as a friend (type 1) or as a parent (type 2) in the Chinese tradition, as well as the teacher as a facilitator (types 3 and 4) in the Western tradition. However, our data did not seem to show students experienced much pastoral care with the Australian university teachers. Although students also felt close to the Australian tutors and EAP/diploma teachers, this closeness seems to distinguish itself from the closeness they received from Chinese teachers: the former came from within the classroom whereas the latter from beyond it.

Explanations for the differences in TSR

Some obvious contextual differences in the two education systems seem able to plausibly explain the different cross-cultural TSRs: physical proximity, communication preferences, class size, and sharing/not sharing the same language and culture. For example, most university students live on campus in China, whereas only 15% Australian university students do so (Radloff 2010). The physical proximity between teachers and students increases the chances and frequency of their interactions, which in turn may lead to more positive experiences of TSR (Astin 1984; Hagenauer and Volet 2014). More contact hours with their teachers back home and smaller class size also seem to have contributed to the higher frequency of interaction, and therefore to this closeness (Hagenauer and Volet 2014). Apart from these contextual factors, we believe cultural values also played an important role. While this is not necessarily true for all members, the Chinese collective culture tends to value interpersonal relationships and in-group harmony (Holmes 2006). Therefore,

having a close and harmonious teacher–student relationship is usually valued and pursued by both Chinese university teachers and students. In addition, the Chinese higher education context tends to promote a sense-of-family atmosphere (Wang and Du 2014), so teachers, who are usually the older members in the “family” of class can feel “obligated” to look after their students. Younger teachers may assume the older brother/sister role (caring and equal) in the family, and older teachers on the other hand may assume the more powerful “parental” role: in addition to care and love, they feel the responsibility to cultivate students’ moral character (caring but hierarchal). The assumed kinship terms (using kinship terms to address those who are not blood relations) in Chinese testify to such a “family” concept among Chinese people living or working in a community (Chang and Holt 1991). Moreover, Chinese interpersonal relationships, according to Chang and Holt (1991, p. 255), are “attuned to human feeling” and “any interaction that is lacking in human feeling is subject to severe criticism”. This seems to be able to account for our finding that Chinese teachers and students tended to be more emotionally involved in building a relationship.

In the Australian educational context, however, the TSRs seem more equal, but move along the continuum of closeness–distance. There may be two reasons behind such a finding. First, in the Western educational contexts, the teacher–student closeness that Chinese participants desired (such as building friendship with teachers) can be considered inappropriate, and therefore discouraged (Aultman et al. 2009; Sibii 2010). Western researchers call for a balance between being friendly and becoming a friend in the TSR, and maintenance of a professional distance between students and teachers (Hagenauer and Volet 2014) due to the inherent power imbalance between students and teachers. While China’s higher education system also has administrative and ethical restrictions for teachers to follow, they are in many ways different from those outlined by Australian universities as illustrated in the literature review. This is due to the Chinese traditional culture about the interpersonal relationship in general and the teacher–student relationship in particular which still exert a dominant influence on how TSR is expected by students and handled as indicated in this study and other studies (Liu 2018). Indeed, compared with teachers’ disciplinary knowledge, teaching methodology, and creation of a positive classroom learning environment, the degree of care that teachers show to students is rated by Chinese students as the most important factor in TSR (Liu 2020).

Second, the managerial reforms in and marketisation of higher education over the past 25 years have changed universities into higher education service providers (Law and Fiedler 2012; Liu 2018). Accordingly, the relationship between higher education institutions and students has been transformed into that of service providers and customers. Our findings suggest that Australian teachers are more service-minded, treating their relationship with students more as between professionals and clients than their Chinese counterparts although Chinese universities are taking up the service notion (Liu 2018). Such a shift in TSR together with the concern about university staff misconduct with students leads some Australian researchers to call for the same strict professional standards in higher education as those in health care professions in managing TSR (Cuthbert and Zammit 2017). Although pastoral care of students is still practised in Western universities,

for instance in student security (Sawir et al. 2009), the mounting pressure from the research, teaching, and service roles makes academics less willing or capable to invest time into providing such care to students without acknowledgement by the universities and with the stress that building such a relationship could cause them (Laws and Fiedler 2012). Moreover, the caution of academics about boundary crossing and the possible legal consequences of an inappropriate close relationship with students also deter them from actively engaging in providing pastoral care. The different perceptions about university students across the two cultures (adults in the West vs minors in China) seem to be another factor contributing to the different scopes of pastoral care provided.

Most of the Chinese students' negative sentiments about TSR in the Australian context were about the frustrating communication with their Australian teachers. The students' preferred style of communication was at odds with the practice at the Australian university. Specifically, the finding reveals a tension between verbal communication vs written communication, immediate responses vs delayed responses, and spontaneous communication vs scheduled communication. Chinese students prefer verbal, immediate and spontaneous communication because that was the type of communication they had experienced daily and were accustomed to in their home Chinese universities. Such communication experiences are very much a reflection of the TSR in Chinese culture and Chinese education system as outlined early in this Discussion. In the Chinese culture, university teachers perceive themselves as both students' teachers and parents/older siblings who should show care and love by helping students when they see students in need. In addition, teachers endeavour to meet the public and the university expectation of them being a *liangshiyiyou* (a good teacher and helpful friend). As a result, they usually allow their students to contact them in person, through a phone call, or on WeChat, even after hours, to meet the latter's learning and sometimes emotional needs. Compared with Australian TSR, Chinese TSR attaches greater importance to human feeling, the core to interpersonal relationships in Chinese culture (Liu 2018), and the style of communication in the Chinese TSR is a manifestation of such feeling.

For Chinese students who have been used to the above-mentioned communication practice in Chinese universities, Australian teachers, who request written and scheduled communication, may appear more formal, business-like and therefore less caring in the Chinese students' eyes. Such a communication style in TSR at Australian (and other Western) universities, however, has its origin in the Australian (and Western) workplace culture. It is expected and viewed as desirable that an employee, an academic or professional, makes a distinction between work hours and after hours. If an academic allows themselves to be contacted by students as is practised in China, they would feel their personal space intruded upon and entitled rights compromised. Asking students to send their inquiries through emails also allows the teacher to better organise their working hours. In addition, communicating through the university email system rather than on social media/personal phone is not only following the code of ethics for Australian teachers but is also a way of ensuring accountability (Monash University 2020).

Conclusion, limitation, and further research

With more than half a million international students seeking education in Australia and many more in other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, students' satisfaction with overseas experience, including their interactions with the local culture and people, is crucial to host universities and governments. This qualitative interview study examined the teacher–student relationships experienced by students in Sino–Australian 2+2 joint programs.

This study is one of the first that particularly focusses on students' lived experiences of cross-cultural TSRs and provides important insights into cross-cultural TSR. Such insights are instrumental to improving cross-cultural experiences of international students on these and other similar transnational joint programs. This study revealed a mismatch between students' expectations about the TSR and communication with teachers, and the TSR practices and communication preferences in the Australian higher education context. The findings indicate that these joint program students may have experienced less frustration had they been prepared by their home institutions in cross-cultural awareness. The host university, on the other hand, should also provide induction to international students to further develop their awareness and understanding about the TSR and the communication styles that are practised differently at the host university.

Future research on TSR may be both qualitative and quantitative, using surveys as well as interviews and including a larger student sample and teachers from different cultures. This further research may lead to deeper insights into TSR between cross-border higher education institutions, which may in turn lead to higher satisfaction of international students.

Funding This research was supported by Women in Research Grant Scheme of Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia (2017).

References

- Anderson, R. (2010). The 'idea of a university' today. <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-idea-of-a-university-today>
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Students Development*, 40(5), 518–529.
- Aultman, L. P., Williams-Johnson, M. R., & Schutz, P. A. (2009). Boundary dilemmas in teacher–student relationships: Struggling with “the line”. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(5), 636–646.
- Australian Government Department of Education and Training. (2018). Education brief—China. <https://china.embassy.gov.au/files/bjng/Country%20Brief%20China%20MAY%202018.pdf>
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.
- Beijing University. (2016). Code of conduct for teachers of Beijing University. <https://hr.pku.edu.cn/docs/2020-05/a9f04e8de7104b40a09bf339fa5f2e47.pdf>
- Cen, Y. (2013). Using cognitive interviews to explore the many different meanings undergraduate students in China attribute to the term “college teacher.” *Frontiers of Education in China*, 8(3), 420–447.

- Chang, H.-C., & Holt, G. R. (1991). More than relationship: Chinese interaction and the principle of kuan-hsi. *Communication Quarterly*, 39(3), 251–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463379109369802>.
- Creswell, J. (2008). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Cuthbert, D. & Zammit, F. (2017, November 20). Universities need to rethink policy on student-staff relationships. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/universities-need-to-rethink-policy-on-student-staff-relationships-86623>
- Deem, R. (2006). Conceptions of contemporary European universities: To do research or not to do research? *European Journal of Education*, 41(2), 281–304.
- Graham, A., Bahr, N., Truscott, J., & Powell, M. (2018). *Teachers' professional boundary transgressions: A literature summary*. Lismore, Australia: Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University.
- Hagenauer, G., & Volet, S. E. (2014). Teacher–student relationship at university: An important yet under-researched field. *Oxford Review of Education*, 40(3), 370–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2014.921613>.
- Holmes, P. (2004). Negotiating differences in learning and intercultural communication—ethnic Chinese students in A New Zealand University. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 67(3), 294–307.
- Holmes, P. (2006). Problematising intercultural communication competence in the pluricultural classroom: Chinese students in a New Zealand university. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 6(1), 18–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708470608668906>.
- Hu, G. (2001). *The People's Republic of China country report: English language teaching and The People's Republic of China*. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
- Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2006). Changing practices in Chinese cultures of learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19(1), 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310608668751>.
- Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2008). Images of teachers, learning and questioning in Chinese cultures of learning. In E. Berendt (Ed.), *Metaphors of Learning, Cross-cultural Perspectives* (pp. 177–202). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Karpouza, E., & Emvalotis, A. (2019). Exploring the teacher-student relationship in graduate education: a constructivist grounded theory. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 24(2), 121–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1468319>.
- Laws, T. A., & Fiedler, B. A. (2012). Universities' expectations of pastoral care: Trends, stressors, resource gaps and support needs for teaching staff. *Nurse Education Today*, 32, 796–802.
- Liu, A. (2018). *Can teachers and students be friends? A survey on TSR*. <http://zhishifenzi.blog.caixin.com/archives/183257>
- Liu, Z. (2020). *Harmonious TSR in higher education leads to higher quality education*. http://unt.csn.cn/gx_gxms/202006/t20200616_5143875.shtml
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- MOE. (2012). Code of conduct for higher education teachers. http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A04/moe_693/s8052/201201/t20120110_168674.html.
- MOE. (2019). Sino-foreign jointly running schools: From scale increase to quality improvement. <http://jsj.moe.gov.cn/news/2/1296.shtml>
- Monash University. (2014). Monash University enterprise agreements. <https://adm.monash.edu/enterprise-agreements/>
- Monash University. (2020). Staff/student personal relationships procedures. https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/797432/Staff-Student-Personal-Relationships.pdf
- Newman, J. H. (1957). *The idea of the university*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Owen, P. R., & Zwahr-Castro, J. (2007). Boundary issues in academia: Student perceptions of faculty student boundary crossings. *Ethics and Behavior*, 17(2), 117–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508420701378065>.
- Radloff, A. (2010). Doing more for learning: Enhancing engagement and outcomes: Australasian survey of student engagement: Australasian student engagement report. *Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Camberwell*. <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=ausse>
- Rahimi, M., Halse, C., & Blackmore, J. (2017). Transnational secondary schooling and im/mobile international students. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 44, 299–321.

- Renmin University of China. (Revised) (2019). Code of conduct for teachers of Renmin University of China. <http://jsgzb.ruc.edu.cn/gzzd/xnwj/ecbaefe5e9954a5db7513201c5322a9e.htm>
- Rice, R. E., D'Ambra, J., & More, E. (1998). Cross-cultural comparison of organizational media evaluation and choice. *Journal of Communication*, 48, 3–26.
- Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Nyland, C., Ramia, G., & Rawlings-Sanaei, F. (2009). The pastoral care of international students in New Zealand: Is it more than a consumer protection regime? *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 29(1), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790802655049>.
- Shore, C. (2008). Audit culture and illiberal governance: Universities and the politics of accountability. *Anthropological Theory*, 8(3), 278–298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499608093815>.
- Sibiri, R. (2010). Conceptualizing teacher immediacy through the ‘companion’ metaphor. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15, 531–542.
- Skyrme, G., & McGee, A. (2016). Pulled in many directions: Tensions and complexity for academic staff responding to international students. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(7), 759–772. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1183614>.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tran, L. T., & Vu, T. T. P. (2016). ‘I’m not like that, why treat me the same way?’ The impact of stereotyping international students on their learning, employability and connectedness with the workplace. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 43, 203–220.
- University of International Business and Economics. (2018). Code of conduct for teachers of University of International Business and Economics. <http://hr.uibe.edu.cn/sdfs/zdjs/xxzd/63575.htm>
- University of Melbourne. (2009). Appropriate workplace behaviour policy (mpf1328). <https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1328>
- Vu, H., & Doyle, S. (2014). Across borders and across cultures: Vietnamese students’ positioning of teachers in a university twinning programme. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 40(3), 267–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2014.903026>.
- Wang, L., & Du, X. (2014). Chinese teachers’ professional identity and beliefs about the teacher-student relationships in an intercultural context. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 9(3), 429–455.
- Yang, Y. (2008). The importance of the teacher for developing interest in learning English by Chinese students. *International Education Studies*, 1(1), 95–100.
- Zhang, Q., & Watkins, D. (2007). Conceptions of a good tertiary EFL teacher in China. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), 781–790.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Li Bai is a senior lecturer working at Queensland University of Technology. Her research areas include Transnational Higher Education, Academics Research Productivity, Chinese Higher Education, and Teaching English/Chinese as a Second Language. She teaches Chinese and translation in the Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. She has experience of teaching both Chinese and English as a second language.

Ying Xian Wang is a senior lecturer working at Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests include international students’ overseas experiences, Teaching Chinese as a Second Language, and Chinese Studies. She is working as senior lecturer of Chinese in the Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. She has extensive experience of teaching both Chinese and English as a second language.