

**Student-Teacher Relationships:
How Is the Relationship With your Teacher related to Student Well-Being**

No **significant learning**
can occur without a
significant relationship



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Abstract

Introduction: The student-teacher relationship has to be seen increasingly important in higher education students. This relationship has been linked to many important areas in a student's life. Influencing their academic success, development and essentially student well-being in general. Existing research has been focusing on many aspects of the student teacher relationship by which there have been only a few focused on barriers specifically in the higher educational context. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to investigate higher education students' perceptions of existing barriers that hinder them from forming a beneficial relationship with their teachers. The second aim focused on identifying the three most frequent barriers.

Methods: A qualitative study with in-depth interviews was conducted. 18 students (50% female, M 21.7 + SD 0.9) from the University of Twente took part. Thematic analysis was used to examine the transcripts, from which a coding schema was then created.

Results: The analysis revealed three key themes: *'Teacher characteristics'*, *'Cultural barriers'* and *'Power imbalances'*. These themes provided a good overview of students' perspectives, including attitudes, generational differences, character traits, language barriers, limited worldviews, authority, intimidation and exclusion as potential barriers. With attitude, character traits and exclusion, write down from most to least, are the three most frequently mentioned barriers.

Discussion: Overall, the study revealed many barriers that give comprehensive insights on student-teacher relationships in higher education. Most of them can be supported by previous research. The findings added power imbalances as a new under researched aspect in this field. Nevertheless, limitations could be identified such as concerns about representativeness. Recommendations suggest to further investigate the new identified barrier to justify.

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1. Introduction

In recent years the number of university students that suffer from mental health issues almost doubled. In 2022, 44% of students in the Netherlands reported having problems such as anxiety, depression, ADHD and substance abuse (DUB, 2022). This high number raises concerns and results in the question of underlying causes. The quality of the relationship between students and teachers in higher education is an important aspect of students' academic success and overall well-being. The understanding of the relationship between students and their teachers in higher education has improved significantly in the last few years (Snijders et al., 2020). Favourable student-teacher relationships are seen as essential for promoting student engagement, facilitating effective learning and enhancing the educational experience (Roorda et al., 2011). Moreover, research suggests having a positive relationship with a teacher may help students to feel more motivated and can actually enhance the students' motivation and even get them to have fun learning about subjects they have never been interested in before (Fredrikson & Rhodes, 2004). Students are more likely to actively participate in the learning process when they perceive their teachers as being supportive and respectful. They will gain a sense of responsibility for their own education and begin to engage more deeply with subjects (Ingraham et al., 2018). Generally, a teacher who genuinely cares about his students generates a beneficial learning environment that, as a result, inspires a love of learning that goes beyond the classroom. However, it is important to acknowledge that barriers may exist that hinder the formation of these beneficial relationships, potentially impacting student well-being (McHugh et al., 2012). Given the high prevalence of mental health issues among students, it is plausible that difficulties in student-teacher relationships contribute to these challenges.

1.1 Student well-being

It was seen that the academic performance of a student is very closely linked to the students well-being. According to Sun & Shek (2014), student well-being is generally defined as “a state of psychological, intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual wellness”. To go more in depth, it is seen as a multidimensional construct with different dimensions. On the one hand, student well-being refers to the extent to which students feel comfortable in the school environment, which includes positive affect, absence of negative affect and cognitive evaluation of life/school (Fraine et al., 2005). On the other hand, it includes indicators such as psychological optimism, intellectual stimulation, emotional centredness, physical resilience, social connectedness and spiritual meaning in life. These indicators reflect the positive functioning of students in both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions (Sun & Shek, 2014).

An optimal school context, characterised by positive attitudes, emotional experiences and the absence of physical and social problems, is critical for promoting student well-being. Students with positive relationships to teachers often show better emotional adjustment results. The support and validation that students receive from teachers are linked to shaping students self-esteem and sense of significance (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). When teachers establish warm, supportive, and respectful connections with their students, it creates a sense of belonging and promotes positive emotional experiences (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). This, in turn, contributes to students' overall well-being.

1.2 The student-teacher relationship

The student-teacher relationship was identified as an important role in the educational field, characterised by trust, respect, and effective communication (Pianta et al., 2012). It has many different interactions and influences that have an effect on students' academic progress and personal growth. These relationships can be understood and explained with the help of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and Attachment Theory (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Self-Determination Theory emphasises the importance of students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy in this case refers to the sense of being in control of one's own decisions, while competence means feeling capable and effective, and relatedness indicates the need for belongingness and social connections (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The student-teacher relationship plays a significant role in supporting these needs. If a teacher establishes a good atmosphere that promotes autonomy, where he tries to give choices, involve students in the decision-making, and encourage independent thinking, students are more likely to feel motivated to engage actively in their learning (Fredrikson & Rhodes, 2004). Similarly, when teachers create opportunities for competence development, such as offering challenging tasks, providing constructive feedback, and recognizing students' progress, students experience a sense of competence, which gives them motivation and increases engagement (Fredrikson & Rhodes, 2004). Additionally, the student-teacher relationship can fulfil the need for relatedness. Teachers that establish warm, supportive, and respectful connections with their students create a sense of belonging and this way increases positive emotional experiences. Attachment Theory gives further insights into the student-teacher relationship by stressing the importance of secure attachments or relationships. According to Attachment Theory students develop an emotional connection with their teachers by seeking comfort, support and guidance. Secure relationships with teachers give students an atmosphere of safety in which they can explore, take chances, and learn efficiently. When teachers are responsive, caring, and consistent, students develop a sense

of trust and security, enabling them to thrive academically and emotionally. Generally, it can be seen that the student-teacher relationship is a dynamic connection that can support students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

A poor student-teacher connection, in turn, can have detrimental effects on students. One of the main consequences of such a relationship is subsequently poor academic performance. This is because students may feel demotivated when there is a lack of respect, trust, and communication between the teacher and student (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Moreover, research suggests that academic achievement is often closely linked to mental and emotional issues (El Ansari & Stock, 2010; Miller-Lewis et al., 2014). It was seen that students who have a poor relationship with their teacher often have lower general well-being. These students then suffer from low confidence and self-worth, leading to emotional distress, anxiety, or tension (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2009). They may feel alone, disheartened, and unsupported, resulting in their reluctance to speak up in class, ask questions, or seek assistance when needed. Furthermore, a study by Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, (2009) indicates that children who had poor relationships with their teachers are more likely to evolve behavioural problems, including acting out in class, being disruptive, even skipping school and engaging in dangerous behaviours such as substance abuse and criminality (Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009). A bad relationship with a teacher can also negatively impact a student's self-esteem, leading to less confidence in their abilities or even feelings of being a failure. This will in conclusion affect their ability to learn, academic achievement, and their general well-being. For that reason, it is critical to build strong bonds between students and their teachers in order to support their academic achievement and general wellbeing.

1.3 Existing Barriers

In establishing these promoting relationships teachers as well as students might come across certain barriers that disrupt forming a good connection. There are several existing barriers that have been identified by previous research. One identified barrier is that how teachers and students see and interact with one another can be influenced by cultural differences. When working with students from different cultural backgrounds, teachers may find it difficult to recognise and meet each student's specific needs, which may affect the quality of the connection (Sarı & Yüce, 2020). Moreover, different cultures have different worldviews and standards about learning and education in general (Sarı & Yüce, 2020). For instance, some cultures prioritise respect for authority, while others emphasise critical thinking and collaborative learning. Additionally, cultural norms shape the goals and aspirations parents have

for their children's education. Some cultures value academic achievement as a pathway to success, while others prioritise character development or vocational skills (Sarı & Yüce, 2020). Those cultural differences are often connected to more time required in teaching and mutual understanding which will result in the next barrier.

Lack of support or training from the teachers' side can as well challenge the building of a connection. Lack of training or support may make it difficult for teachers to engage with students positively, especially those who exhibit problematic behaviours or have special needs (Coristine et al., 2022). It can be difficult for teachers to meet the demands of a variety of students. Teachers may find it challenging to give each student individualised help and attention due to the variety of learning styles, strengths, and issues that students present (Coristine et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2017). The quality of a student-teacher relationship may too often suffer as a result of this lack of training from the teachers side.

1.4 Present Study

Concluding, and by taking all the above mentioned factors into consideration it can be said that the student-teacher relationship in higher education plays an important role in a student's life and needs to be promoted in order to ensure their well-being. To prevent negative impacts of bad student-teacher relationships and prevent high numbers of mental health issues among students, it is important to look at barriers that exist to form beneficial student-teacher relationships. However, even though previous research identified a few barriers in this context, there is limited research existing about the barriers in a higher educational setting. Nevertheless, one study suggested that lack of training on the teacher's side can be a reason for these barriers. To prevent this from happening, the issue of barriers in student and teacher relationship should be addressed in detail so that they can be identified and prevented. This study therefore aims to explore the barriers students perceive in higher education institutions that prevent them from building positive relationships with their teachers. Hence, the two research questions for this qualitative study will be:

RQ1: "What are the current barriers to form a beneficial student-teacher relationship perceived by higher education students?"

RQ2: "What are the three most frequently reported barriers?"

2. Methods

A qualitative descriptive study was used as part of a collaborative research project to shed light on the subject of the effect of teacher-student relationships on student well-being. Five researchers were involved in this project, where each researcher within the project had a specific area of focus, hence this study will only deal with the perceived barriers from the students' perspective. The aim was to gain insights on students' varying perspectives on perceived barriers in establishing a good relationship with teachers. As a result, it was decided that qualitative in-depth interviews would be suitable as this method of research allows for more flexibility in the study process and will give in depth insights about personal experiences and perspectives. Also, little is known about the perceived barriers of students in this area, making qualitative in-depth interviews essential.

2.1 Participants

This thesis study focused on University students. Via convenience sampling, participants were found and contacted in person or over the phone. In this case, friends and fellow students were contacted. In order to be considered as a participant in the study, one had to be at least 18 years old, speak sufficient English and enrolled full-time at the University of Twente. The inclusion criteria of being a student at the University of Twente was based on my collaborators research, for this study it was only relevant to be a full-time student at any university. In total 18 students were interviewed, from whom 9 were women and 9 were men. Participants were Dutch, Romanian, German, Armenian and Greek and their ages range from 20 to 23, with a mean age of 21.7 (standard deviation = 0.9) years (see table 1). The University of Twente's Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences ethics committee gave its approval for this study. (20.03.2023). Additionally, all participants gave their informed consent verbally and signed an informed consent form.

Table 1*Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants (N =18)*

Sample Characteristics	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender				
Men	9	50		
Women	9	50		
Age				
			21.72	0.96
Nationality				
German	8	44.44		
Armenian	1	5.56		
Romanian	6	33.33		
Dutch	2	11.11		
Greek	1	5.56		

2.2 Materials

For this study, a semi-structured interview guide comprising four demographic questions and six open- and closed-ended questions about the effects of student teacher relationship on student wellbeing was used. There were questions that participants were asked in order to learn more about the subject. The interview guide was utilised for all interviews. For this study only the four demographic questions and seven open questions are relevant (Appendix A). The aim of these six questions was to find out what the current barriers to form a beneficial student-teacher relationship perceived by students are. Topics addressed what students dislike in teachers, what annoys them and when they might feel misunderstood or even excluded by teachers. Another important example question used was: “*Are there any specific differences between you and your teacher that make it difficult to connect?*”. This question will give insight into what might influence the student-teacher relationship. Data collection for this

study was conducted using Microsoft Teams (version 1.6.00.7354). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the same tool to ensure accurate documentation of the participants' responses. Atlas.ti (version 8.3) was used to analyse the collected data.

2.3 Procedure

To ensure the effectiveness of the interview guide, two pilot tests were conducted with two university students. The tests both lasted 45 minutes. The purpose of the tests was to find out if any changes were required for the interview guide. The pilot tests were successful, and there were no major problems, suggesting that the interview guide was suitable. Although most of the questions were understandable to the interviewees, some minor modifications were made to the phrasing to avoid any possible misunderstandings.

The relevant individual interviews were carried out with the participants between 21.03.2023 and 07.04.2023. All of the participants were interviewed online via Microsoft Teams (version 1.6.00.7354). The participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the interviews. Before the interview, an informed consent form (Appendix B) was sent to each participant via email, which they had to sign electronically. They were also asked if they were comfortable with the interview being audio and video recorded. The participants were informed that the recordings and transcripts would be securely stored until 20.09.2023. The researchers provided their contact information to all participants. In the course of the interview all questions were asked in the same order as in the interview guide. If questions were not answered in depth, researchers would ask for more elaboration. Additionally when participants were explaining something with illustration and in depth, interviewers nodded and smiled. At the end, all participants were thanked for their time and participation and it was mentioned that if questions arise, they could contact the researcher any time.

2.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allowed for a systematic examination of the data and the identification of recurring patterns and themes. In this study the aim was to find out students' perspectives of barriers that hinder them from forming good relationships with their teachers. By identifying patterns and themes in the interview data, the students' experiences can be narrowed and named and barriers can be determined. The researcher made use of an inductive approach to remain open to new themes that emerged directly from the data without using preconceived notions or theoretical frameworks. This method allowed flexibility in

capturing participants' different perspectives and experiences regarding perceived barriers. To transcribe the recordings the researcher used Microsoft Teams (version 1.6.00.7354) and made sure to remove any personal information from the data to protect the privacy of the participants. The researcher also carefully proofread the transcripts to make sure they were free from errors and readable to all researchers.

To analyse the data, the researcher followed the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. Firstly, the researcher went through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. After that, the transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti (version 8.3) to facilitate the coding process. In the second step, initial codes were created based on interesting or meaningful content related to the research questions identified from the transcripts of two interviews. This is done to organise and categorise the data and with that the researcher is able to identify patterns and see connections.

Several criteria were taken into account while creating these codes. The primary criteria was that the codes addressed the specific barriers that students believed prevented the development of a positive relationship with their teachers. Preferably the codes indicated the most significant and salient barriers to developing a beneficial student-teacher relationship to make sure that the analysis was concentrated on the data's most important features. They were thus immediately relevant to the research question. Another criterion was that the codes should not be based on preconceived notions or assumptions but rather need to accurately reflect the meaning of the text and be based purely on the data. This was done so that the analysis would be free from the researcher's pre-existing ideas and the codes could be found in the data. Another factor that ensured that the codes accurately reflected the meaning of the text and would distinguish between different themes or patterns was to make sure that they were clear, specific and unambiguous. In addition, all codes had to be mutually exclusive, meaning that only one code was assigned to each piece of information to avoid duplication or misinterpretation. By applying these criteria, the researcher ensured that the codes made a significant contribution to the overall understanding of the data and fit within the broad theoretical framework of the study's topic.

To enhance this additionally, five researchers worked collaboratively to increase the inter-subjectivity of the analysis. The intercoder reliability has been recognized as an important factor in ensuring the consistency and accuracy of coding decisions. In this study, therefore, five researchers worked together and coded, while following the aforementioned steps and by taking into account the criteria, two transcripts collaboratively. After that, all researchers reviewed the codes and discussed until agreement has been reached. This helped to make codes subjective, to

clarify coding rules and procedures and to identify areas of misunderstanding or disagreement in the data. As a result, it enhanced validity and reliability while reducing errors.

After identifying the codes, broader themes were searched for and reviewed in the third and fourth step (Braun & Clarke 2006). In order to find themes, the researcher compared and contrasted the codes to find overarching patterns of meaning that emerged. When preliminary themes had been found, the researcher evaluated and improved them to make sure they are relevant and mandatory summaries of the data. The emerging themes help answer the research question by highlighting participants' experiences that will be seen as barriers in student-teacher relationships. In order to ensure that the themes accurately reflect the data's content and are supported by evidence, it is necessary to review the data again. This was again done collaboratively to add to the intercoder reliability. The researcher shared a document with another researcher to critically discuss the provisional themes. After the discussion, in the fifth step (Braun & Clarke 2006), the researcher clearly defined and named each theme. Each theme was defined precisely and succinctly, and each definition is supported with examples drawn from the data. As the sixth and last step, a final coding scheme was then created based on these codes and themes, as detailed in the results section.

3. Results

A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts, which identified significant concepts within the data. The evolved themes are considered crucial for understanding the current barriers that students in higher education perceive when it comes to forming beneficial student-teacher relationships. Teacher characteristics, cultural barriers and power imbalances are the three identified theme names (Table 2).

Table 2

Coding scheme

Theme	Code	Definition	Example	Frequency
Teacher characteristics	Attitude	All attitudes that a teacher has towards the students, whether	<i>“Well, when they have expectations for teachers to uh, sorry for students to show up in a very hybrid system right now, post COVID and then they have set these expectations. We</i>	37

		personal or academic	<i>even received announcements that COVID is over and you should show up. But I feel like this is not the right atmosphere. This is not right."</i>	
Character traits	All differences in character traits between a teacher and a student		<i>"..when they have no sense of humour, and are very serious and boring.." "It's the lack of confidence.."</i>	33
Age	Difference in age		<i>"..like 10 years older, but some of them are like, I don't know, 30 years older or something, I think it's a bit more difficult to connect because you don't really have anything to talk about."</i>	5
Cultural differences	Language	All situation where communication between people is hindered or resulting in misunderstandings due to	<i>"And they just misunderstand me because of that and they don't give me a chance to express it the way that I want to express it. And they always correct me in their most simpler terms. I feel. I think that's a very cultural thing here."</i>	8

		differences in language	
Limited worldview	A limited worldview due to the cultural background of a teacher	<i>"..ask about the markets outside Europe. And it seems like teachers don't know about it. They also seem like they don't care or they don't like to talk about that and they're so supportive of Europe and they think Europe is the central hub as well as Netherlands. And I see so much pride for Netherlands as a country."</i>	2
Power imbalances	Authority Difference in power dynamic due to the teacher being authoritative	<i>"And then, like, treat the students in an inferior way. If they'd like, put themselves way too high above the students. I think that's a big turnoff.."</i>	17
Intimidation	Every situation in which the student felt afraid or threatened by a teacher	<i>"if they make specific comments about things of the students, and everyone knows who they are talking about, but they don't directly address them"</i>	7

Exclusion	Every situations in which one or more students felt excluded by a teacher	<i>“Yeah, so many times with sexism, just like presenting as a girl in a group full of guys. And then he makes me feel excluded because he makes jokes about me being the only girl he wants.”</i>	32
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3.1 Teacher characteristics

This theme is defined by all the barriers that arise from the individual attributes of the teacher. These attributes can influence communication, understanding, and the connection between students and teachers. Participants identified various behaviours and characteristics, including attitude, age, and overall personality.

3.1.1 Attitude

Furthermore, the attitude of the teacher seems to be an important barrier when it comes to forming beneficial relationships for some students. Attitude can be described as all attitudes that a teacher has towards the students, whether personal or academic. It encompasses their mindset, beliefs, and the overall approach towards their role as a teacher and towards their students. Moreover, it reflects the teacher's demeanour and the way he perceives and interacts with his students. Many attitudes were mentioned that students perceive as non-promoting in their relationship with their teachers. Participants for example described that some teachers have too high or just different expectations of students. One participant for example mentioned:

Well, when they have expectations for teachers to uh, sorry for students to show up in a very hybrid system right now, post COVID and then they have set these expectations. We even received announcements that COVID is over and you should show up. But I feel like this is not the right atmosphere. This is not right.

The student here did not think it was okay that the teacher expected all lectures to be fully back on campus already, as she felt she needed more time and it may not have been safe enough to return to campus. This is a situation in which the students and teachers attitude did not align and that made the student dislike the teacher. Another attitude that was seen as disruptive by many students was when teachers are not helpful and are not trying to understand the students'

needs. They mentioned situations in which they tried to reach out to teachers for help and they simply had no will to offer assistance or even show effort to understand what was going on. This kind of attitude made students annoyed and lose motivation to seek help again as mentioned by one participant. In addition to that, teachers who come across as if they think they are something better are seen to be disliked by students, meaning that this arrogant attitude is preventing students from connecting. One participant explained that when the teacher will always think that whatever he is saying is right they will immediately have a bad impression of the teacher and if not necessary will stop interacting with that teacher. Another participant stated that he could only not connect with a teacher if the teacher seems not to want any connection by saying “The only point where I can't really connect to a teacher is when he doesn't want to connect with me at all and he tries to block this.”. Meaning that when the teacher avoids interaction there will not be a way for the student to form any kind of relationship.

3.1.2 Age

Another aspect is the generation gap, moreover the age of the teacher. This generation gap between students and teachers refers to a difference in perspective, beliefs, and values that may arise due to differences in age and life experiences. One student mentioned that the teacher's age can influence the relationship since they will not have the same interests, therefore they did not know what they should talk about with teachers, which in result will hamper the connection. She explained it by saying:

I think it's difficult for teachers that are older than others, because I think some of them are like, at maximum, like 10 years older, but some of them are like, I don't know, 30 years older or something, I think it's a bit more difficult to connect because you don't really have anything to talk about.

It was seen that students feel more in contact with younger teachers because they see more common ground and topics that both are interested in. Which means that students and teachers of a similar age can more easily connect through smalltalk.

3.1.3 Character traits

Character traits, as well, seem to have an influence on the relationship. In this manner the focus lies on specific characteristics that shape the teacher's interaction. Participants described several character traits that they did not like to see in teachers including close-mindedness, impulsiveness, inconsideration, strictness, stubbornness and laziness. As an illustration students answered “when they have no sense of humour, and are very serious and

boring” or “when they are unnecessarily strict” to the question of what they dislike in their teacher. Unappreciated characteristics such as the ones mentioned above were seen to be resulting in withdrawing from classes and moreover the teacher since a student does not understand or like the way a teacher behaves and therefore is not willing to connect as described by a participant.

Contrasting to the unappreciated traits, empathy, humour, compassionism and punctuality were seen to be valued. One student specifically sees punctuality as being beneficial by saying: “Because I feel like I want to respect the time of my opposite ... So if this doesn't happen, I feel like it's annoying for me to work with them, not really hard, but annoying.”. For her it is important to be punctual especially and she expects the same thing from the teacher. And if not given, the connection between the teacher will lack from a feeling of annoyance.

3.2 Cultural Barriers

This theme shows barriers that are thought to be a result from different cultural backgrounds. It covers language and a limited worldview.

3.2.1 Language

One cultural barrier seems to be the language barrier referred to situations where students spoke a different language than their teacher. Even though they all communicate in the same language, namely English, it sometimes seems to be difficult to communicate due different ways of communication or misunderstandings in wording or pronunciation. One participant explained that some teachers are not proficient in English and sometimes pronounce words incorrectly, this made the student annoyed and he stopped listening.

One student described that she thinks that due to cultural differences in communicating misunderstandings can arise by stating:

And they just misunderstand me because of that and they don't give me a chance to express it the way that I want to express it. And they always correct me in their most simpler terms. I feel. I think that's a very cultural thing here.

This statement emphasises that forms of expression differ between cultures which makes it harder to communicate. This student felt frustrated because she could not express herself proficiently since the teacher just wants to communicate in his own way.

3.2.2 Limited worldview

Another cultural barrier is the limited world view based on their cultural background. A culturally limited worldview includes limitations in understanding, knowing and appreciating different cultures through one's own cultural background. It was seen that not only language differences can have influence, instead the country in which teachers grew up and how they therefore perceive the outside world might play a role in the student-teacher relationship. This was only stated once by an International Business Administration student but seemed to be important for her when bonding with teachers. She explained that she lived in a lot of different countries all over the world and she wants to continue to do so. This way she would appreciate to know about economies in different countries outside of the Netherlands and Europe generally. She stated that mainly all of her teachers did not know or even do not want to know anything about it. Their focus is mainly on Europe since this is where they come from and what they work with. The participant did not like that and therefore this prevented her from forming a good relationship with the teachers.

3.3 Power imbalances

This theme revealed the imbalances in power that are perceived by students to be a barrier in forming a good relationship with their teacher. Power imbalance refers to situations where one party has significantly more power than the other. It emphasises the presence of unequal power dynamics and how these influence the student-teacher relationship. It includes Authority, intimidation, and exclusion.

3.3.1 Authority

At first, Authority as a barrier. It refers to the power dynamic that can exist between a student and their teacher. The interviews revealed that a lot of students have the feeling that teachers are or that teachers think they are superior to the students. They explained that this makes them feel annoyed and even inhibited in engaging. One participant explained that since the teacher is grading the students, students always have to be careful what they are saying to not offend the teacher. The teacher is in a more powerful position here and has nothing to lose so they could basically say anything and argue in any kind of way, different from the student who has his grade at stake. Authority, all times was described as non-promoting in the student-teacher relationship. Additionally, this feeling of being the inferior, often was aligned with a feeling of powerlessness. One student for example explained that he tried to reach out to the teacher about a certain situation a couple of times but the teacher did not react and therefore

the need of the student was not fulfilled and the problem not solved. The authority of the teacher made the student left powerless. This lack of power contributed to feelings of isolation and disengagement, further preventing the formation of a positive relationship with that teacher.

3.3.2 Intimidation

Additionally, the theme includes the element of intimidation, which covers events in which students felt intimidated or in fear by their teachers. It is significant to highlight that, despite reports of intimidation from certain participants, not all of them experienced it. One student specifically mentioned: “If they make specific comments about things of the students, and everyone knows who they are talking about, but they don't directly address them.”. This behaviour of the teacher intimidated not only the student that he was talking about, but also every student since they do not want the teacher to share this topic. These intimidating behaviours will make students feel embarrassed or afraid and they are less likely to connect with that teacher.

3.3.3 Exclusion

Lastly, exclusion. This refers to all situations in which the teacher is leaving one student or a group of students out or making them feel unwanted. One girl explained that since she is mostly one of the only girls in project work or even generally in her study, there are teachers that make fun of her being a girl and excluding her because of that. She described it as the teacher being sexist by saying: “So many times with sexism, just like presenting as a girl in a group full of guys. And then he makes me feel excluded because he makes jokes about me being the only girl he wants.”. Not only do specific students seem to feel excluded. There were also situations in which a group of students were addressed. One computer science student described: “So she made a comment that she was saying that “This part, I know that computer science students would find it hard” or something like that. And yeah, I felt excluded.”. By saying this in front of the class, it has an impact on all computer science students. Additionally, one student explained that when the teacher and another student with the same mother language are having a conversation it sometimes happens that they switch to this language. She explained that this made her feel excluded since it keeps her from engaging in the conversation and contributing to the topic. These occasions hindered the students from forming a connection with that teacher.

3.4 Frequencies and connection

Looking at the frequencies of the results, it can be seen that attitude was the most frequently used code. 37 participants mentioned situations where the teacher's attitude seemed to be a reason for their lack of connection. The second most frequently mentioned code was character traits, with 33 students reporting experiences where certain character traits were found to be disruptive. These two codes are part of the overall theme of '*teacher characteristics*'. This was closely followed by exclusion as the third most frequently mentioned code, with a frequency of 32. Authority is the fourth most often reported code and its frequency was 17. Both codes fall under the theme '*power imbalances*'. All other codes were reported less than ten times.

Concluding, several perspectives and experiences of students regarding barriers that hinder them from forming a beneficial relationship with their teachers could be gathered. It was seen that teachers' characteristics can be a barrier. This includes the teacher's attitude, his age and his character traits, with a very high frequency for attitude and character traits. Secondly, the cultural background, including language and the limited worldview was seen to be a barrier. And lastly, power imbalances, which includes authority, intimidation and exclusion as potential barriers with a high frequency for exclusion and a relatively high frequency for authority. Some of these might be related as they were often mentioned together. Specifically, the attitude of the teacher was often named together with other codes. So was the attitude of the teacher often a reason for feeling excluded. The attitude was also linked to intimidation as some students seem to be intimidated by a teacher's strong attitude. Additionally, the character traits as well as the attitude a teacher holds can be linked with authority in some situations. Students that did not like teachers' attitudes often feel that their teachers are superior to them. By this it comes apparent that the attitude of a teacher plays a very important role in students' perceptions of the relationship between their teachers and them. This can also be underlined by the frequency of this code. All in all, these findings reflect a great variety of students' perspectives.

4. Discussion

4.1 Main Findings

The aim of this study was to find out which potential barriers make it difficult for students in higher education to build a positive relationship with their teacher and which of them are the three most frequent ones. The results identified several barriers which have been broadly categorised into three main names: teacher characteristics, cultural barriers and power

imbalances. Additionally, attitude, character traits and exclusion were the three most frequently mentioned factors.

Regarding the first research question, “*What are the current barriers to form a beneficial student-teacher relationship perceived by higher education students?*”, the results identified a good overview of several barriers. Firstly, teacher characteristics have been seen as such an important barrier, encompassing a range of factors that are backed up by previous literature. The findings show that students have different preferences and expectations regarding the qualities they value in their teachers (Wayne & Youngs, 2003). For example, it was seen that some students value teachers who are approachable, empathetic and interested in the personal lives of their students. These students seek and prefer teachers that create a warm and supportive environment (McHugh et al., 2012). While others, in contrast, value teachers who are knowledgeable, organised and give clear instructions, which means they rather seek academic competence and structure in their teachers. To illustrate, when a student likes the teacher to be competent and instructional, but the teacher is more empathetic and tries to get to know students more personally by drifting off the topic, this would result in a discrepancy between students' wishes and teachers' characteristics. This study made clear that if students perceive this kind of discrepancy, this will hinder the development of a positive relationship. However, effortful engagement in the student-teacher relationship has already been identified as very important in building a connection. Several students like their teacher to engage in their personal life and learning process, which helps them build a form of relatedness needed to connect (McHugh et al., 2012). This study added that some students also seem to appreciate different types of teachers. Students explained they like to see competence and structure in their teacher rather than them trying too hard to connect by getting personal. This is of particular importance to know because every person's needs and interests can go in two completely opposite sides. These two sides need to be taken into consideration in order to find a middle ground and prevent huge discrepancies.

Cultural differences also emerged as a significant barrier to forming a beneficial student-teacher relationship. These cultural differences have created challenges in understanding and interpreting messages accurately, leading to misunderstandings and potential conflicts (Thravalou et al., 2022). Additionally, these cultural backgrounds influence worldviews and beliefs, sometimes resulting in frustration regarding the students' side (Gay, 2002). That different cultural backgrounds can be challenging in student-teacher relationships regarding different values and perceptions has been acknowledged by previous research and most often seem to stem from a lack of diversity in teachers (Saffold, 2007). The findings of this

study show that even though previous research has well-documented the influence of culture on student-teacher relationships, it remains an issue. This could be because higher education institutions attract students from different cultural backgrounds, each with their own values, beliefs, communication styles and expectations (Thravalou et al., 2022); this barrier becomes even more pronounced. Therefore, these findings emphasise that cultural barriers seem to be persistent regardless of prior recognition. With that, it highlights the need for more effort to master the language properly and offer students a broad worldview that goes beyond their home country and Europe. This is specifically important in higher education since cultural diversity is increasing.

The last barrier, power imbalances, revealed that in higher education settings, there could be a hierarchical structure where teachers hold authority positions and students are positioned as inferior. Teacher characteristics and cultural differences have been frequently mentioned and discussed as barriers in previous studies. Power imbalances, however, have not been directly addressed as a barrier in the student-teacher relationship. A study by McHugh et al. (2012), describes that teachers often have stereotypes which they express and according to which they also behave and which has created a feeling of exclusion in students before. Exclusion was something that this study as well revealed as a highly important barrier. However, in previous research it was not clear that this exclusion can be the case because students perceive their teachers as more powerful. In contrast, this study findings revealed that exclusion is something that is related to the teacher having more power over the students, because when you are able to exclude a person or a group of people, that person usually has more power and stands higher than the other side (United Nations, 2016). The fact that power imbalances in student-teacher relationships do not seem to be such a big issue so far might be because most of the research is on secondary school students. Younger students are still learning basic skills and often need more guidance and support from their teachers. Clear instructions, feedback and guidance are important to help them acquire new knowledge and skills. Older students, on the other hand, already have the capacity for independence and their own decision-making. The older you are, the more of an developed individual you are and the more you want to contribute to society yourself (Luong et al., 2010). Therefore other factors such as power and mutual respect might be more important for them. This can be perfectly evidenced with regard to Attachment-Theory (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). When teachers engage in behaviours that make students feel that the teacher is unapproachable or intimidating, which can hinder effective communication and limit their willingness to seek help or engage in meaningful discussions, students' need for comfort, support and guidance is not met and a secure relationship cannot

develop (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Additionally, it has been seen to influence the distribution of control and decision-making within the classroom, potentially reducing students' autonomy and involvement in the learning process. This, on the other hand, is something that can be explained by the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), where students will not connect with anyone if their need of autonomy is not satisfied. These findings therefore seem to be very reasonable but are still something new in this area. Previous research in student-teacher relationships revealed many disruptive factors but only a few of them stress the importance of the power dynamics as much. Underlying aspects have been identified but they have not been linked to power imbalances before. These findings therefore emphasise the importance of teachers' power when it comes to forming beneficial student-teacher relationships.

Looking closer to the second research question “*What are the three most frequently reported barriers?*”, the results revealed that exclusion, attitude, and character traits are the most frequently reported barriers to forming a beneficial student-teacher relationship. This suggests that these three barriers are particularly important and have a significant impact on the student experience. Studies before often only focused on one specific barrier and its influence on the higher education student-teacher relationship. These findings in regard give a broader overview of barriers in general. Exclusion as mentioned earlier is something that has been seen to be important in student-teacher relationships before (McHugh et al., 2012). Attitude and character traits as well have been identified as important factors in connection building (Wayne & Youngs, 2003). With identifying the frequencies of the barriers this study emphasised which barriers should be focused on or which need more attention. It highlights that even though these barriers have been discussed before they are still not only persistent but also of high importance.

4.2 Limitations

Firstly, one limitation of this study is that it had a relatively poor sample size, namely 18 students. This could influence the representativeness of the study findings and therefore the study would lack reliability. It would be beneficial to include at least 30 students to ensure that a wide range of in-depth perspectives will be included. Additionally, all participants were recruited via convenience sampling which means that mainly close friends of the researchers participated. This may have restricted the number of responses because they all are in the same courses and have the same teachers, which subsequently impact the study's outcomes. Moreover, all participants came from the same university, different universities could have potentially expanded or minimised the findings. A relevant topic for further research could be a cross-regional study involving different universities across the country or even beyond the

borders. All of the above mentioned limitations increase the possibility of sampling bias, which in conclusion means that the experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study may not reflect the larger population of students. Therefore, future studies should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample size to improve the representativeness of the findings.

Although many barriers were identified, it remains unclear what the underlying reasons for some of these persisting barriers are. This study only focused on identifying students' perceptions of their perceived barriers, but it does not give any indication of the teachers' perspective. Therefore, it is not known whether university teachers are aware that their students hold these perceptions and opinions. In order to increase knowledge, it might be relevant to investigate whether teachers are actually aware of these barriers and if so, why they remain unchanged despite their knowledge. Future research could benefit from including the teacher perspective, thus gaining a more comprehensive understanding of all aspects of barriers in student-teacher relationships.

Additionally, the study identified a significant new finding regarding the role of power imbalances as a major barrier to the formation of a beneficial student-teacher relationship. These findings have been underlined by Attachment Theory and Self-Determination Theory. However, as there is little research that has specifically identified power imbalances as a barrier, the question arises as to what this is and how generalisable these findings are. Since only one university participated in this study, it may be that different universities will minimise the results in terms of power imbalances and make them less necessary. Therefore, future research should aim to explore this area more intensively and find out the specific mechanisms through which power imbalances influence student-teacher relationships. In addition, it is interesting to investigate why power imbalances seem to play such a large role for students in higher education.

4.3 Practical Implementation

Based on the findings of the study, some practical recommendations can be made to promote positive student-teacher relationships in educational contexts and thus improve student well-being. First, it is important to provide training and professional development opportunities for teachers to improve their relationship-building skills with students. Teachers need to become aware of their own attitudes and character traits to emphasise the significance of creating a welcoming classroom. Additionally, displaying empathy, communicating effectively and recognising student needs should be included in such programmes. To close the cultural gap schools should promote cultural sensitivity and understanding by providing teachers with

training on different cultural backgrounds. This should include having an overview about different views of life, markets, customs, expressions and ideas and taking them into account while interacting. Language tests that indicate proficiency in English need to be made necessary for teaching. One important new aspect to address are the power imbalances. Schools should encourage student participation, and open dialogues by striving to create a safe and inclusive environment, where students can feel respected and valued. This can be accomplished through implementation of policies that encourage inclusivity, such as collaborative decision-making between students and teachers and student representation of students in school governance. Teachers that discriminate against certain individuals or groups of students in the form of excluding them need to be identified and penalised. This way universities can show their sincere commitment to stand up against discrimination.

To support the implementation of these recommendations, educational policymakers should develop and implement policies that prioritise positive student-teacher relationships. Schools should also create platforms for student feedback and establish collaborative networks where educators can share best practices. Regular monitoring and evaluation should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of the implemented strategies on student engagement, academic performance, and overall well-being. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can foster a supportive and inclusive environment that promotes positive student-teacher relationships, leading to improved student outcomes.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of the study highlight the importance of students' preferences and expectations regarding the qualities they seek in their teachers, the need for cultural sensitivity and understanding, and the negative impact of power imbalances on student-teacher interactions. In general, these findings are consistent with previous research in secondary education, with the difference that 'power imbalances' were identified as an additional and very important aspect in shaping student-teacher relationships. The consistency of the findings with the literature exceeds the limitations of the study in terms of the representativeness of the sample. Nevertheless, there is a great need for future research to justify the findings and provide a more comprehensive overview of power imbalances as a barrier in shaping student-teacher relationships and thus in promoting student well-being.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introduction

To start off, I would like to thank you for taking the time to do this interview with me today. But before we start, I want to give you some more information about the interview. The overall topic focuses on the effect of student-teacher relationships on student well-being in higher education. The interview is part of a research conducted by five students (Hanna, Lea, Linnea, Maike and Viola).

The aim of the interview is to gain new insights and to answer multiple research questions. According to the research questions, the interview is divided into the following subtopics: *Student-teacher relationship in distance learning, the current barriers to form a beneficial student-teacher relationship perceived by students, students perception of teachers displaying emotions, the impact of short-term teacher relationships on student well-being, and the boundaries of student-teacher relationships*. I will tell you every time when we begin with a new topic.

In order to conduct the interview, we ask you to sign the informed consent which I will send you now. By giving your signature, you agree to all terms mentioned within the informed consent. The interview will be consequently recorded to later on transcribe and analyse the responses. The transcript can only be accessed by the research group and the two supervisors. Your data will be treated anonymously, meaning all information allowing to identify you as a person will be removed. In case that you feel uncomfortable with answering any questions or with your answers being used for this research, you can withdraw from the study at any point.

Please keep in mind that there are no correct or incorrect answers, as we are curious about your personal experience and thoughts. Do you have any questions regarding the information given verbally and written? If not, I would kindly ask you to send me the signed version of the informed consent form back. I will start the recording now.

Personal background:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your nationality?
3. What is your gender?
4. What do you study?
5. In which year of the study are you?

What are the current barriers to form a beneficial student-teacher relationship perceived by students?

1. When did you feel specifically misunderstood by a teacher?
Probe: Which aspects led to this misunderstanding?
2. In what situation did you feel excluded by a teacher?
Probe: Describe and evaluate why and what happened in that situation
3. What makes you dislike a teacher?
4. Are there any specific differences between you and your teacher that make it difficult to connect?
5. What behaviour did your teacher show that made you feel annoyed?
6. When did you feel the worst or what made you feel unwell after a class? Elaborate on that?

Appendix B

The Informed Consent Form

Opening Statement

You are being invited to participate in a research study focusing on student-teacher relationships and student well-being. This study is being done by Hanna, Lea, Linnea, Maike, and Viola from the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente.

The goal of this research study is to gain new insights into the student-teacher relationship and its relation to student well-being. We are going to conduct interviews which will approximately last 45-60 minutes. With your consent, the information will be recorded, transcribed, and then analysed. Accordingly, the created transcripts will possibly be quoted in the final research reports.

You can voluntarily discontinue participating in this study at any time. Any question may be omitted if you wish to do so.

Our analysis indicates that there are no known risks associated with this research topic. Your responses to this study will, as much as possible, stay private. We will lessen risks by safely storing the data on a cloud service accessible with an university account. The transcription that will be created for this interview will only be read by the members of the study group and the teaching staff. The data will be made anonymous by removing names, dates, and places. The potential quotes will also all remain anonymous for the purposes of the report. The aim of this interview recording is to analyse the data truthfully to your opinion. Six months after this interview, all of the data will be destroyed.

Study contact details for further information:

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Consent Form

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please tick the appropriate boxes

**Y No
es**

Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information dated [DD/MM/YYYY], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

I understand that taking part in the study involves participating in an audio-recorded interview, which will be transcribed as text.

Use of the information in the study

I understand that information I provide will be used for this specific study I was informed about.

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente by ethicscommittee-bms@utwente.nl