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Exploring the Relationships Between University Staff and Students: A Comparison Between Two European Countries

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Abstract

The quality of student-university relationships can significantly influence student engagement and experience, yet cross-cultural differences remain underexplored. This study examined Dutch ($n = 407$, Mage = 22.2) and French students ($n = 394$, Mage = 22.9), focusing on their relationship quality perceptions with staff and its impact on engagement. A quantitative correlational research design was adopted, using the Relationship Quality Scale, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students, and the Relationship Quality-Based Student Loyalty Scale. The results showed that students' trust in their university and professors, alongside academic motivation, strongly predicted overall satisfaction with the institution and its programs. Motivation mediated this relationship, explaining 18% of the variance in satisfaction. French students reported higher motivation and more positive perceptions of their university than Dutch students. The study underscores the importance of trust and support in fostering student satisfaction while highlighting cultural differences in engagement and institutional perception.

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Practitioner Notes

- Training in relational competencies and conflict resolution could strengthen students' trust in the institution, improve their engagement and overall university experience.
- Peer mentoring and support groups could help first-year students navigate stress and adaptation challenges, potentially boosting their motivation and persistence.
- If educators actively listened to students' concerns, they would foster a supportive environment that enhances student well-being and academic success.
- Self-efficacy, anxiety, employment prospects, and tuition costs might influence students' academic performance and overall experience, warranting deeper exploration.

Keywords

Relationship quality, student engagement, higher education.

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Introduction

Higher education institutions face numerous challenges in fostering students' interest and motivation. This requires intentional strategies that go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge, especially as the diversity of learning styles, academic backgrounds, and language proficiencies further complicate students' engagement. The transition to self-directed university study can also leave students feeling isolated, underscoring the importance of regular and personalized interactions with faculty members. The implementation of fair assessments is also essential for building trust and facilitating effective communication between students and professors (Plantade-Gipch et al., 2023a). In a context where international student mobility has increased significantly, access to such opportunities remains uneven and challenges institutions to support their development. Digital learning, particularly through distance education and artificial intelligence, also transforms higher education, offering new opportunities while raising important questions regarding equal access and the quality of the resulting educational experiences (Samson et al., 2025). All these challenges highlight the need for inclusive and responsive teaching approaches.

Higher education institutions face specific challenges in fostering the level of engagement in studies, and strengthening relationships between students, academic staff, and the institution. These factors significantly influence the overall educational experience and learning outcomes (Skinner, 2016). Academic engagement supports students' performances and success, enhances their memory retention, fosters a sense of self-actualization, and contributes to their subjective well-being (Rivera & Palmer Garden, 2021). If the drivers of engagement and relationships in higher education are thoughtfully integrated, they may contribute to improved learning outcomes and foster a stronger sense of connection and belonging within the academic community. Investigating the factors that facilitate academic engagement can strengthen the capacity of higher education institutions, researchers, and policymakers to cultivate and sustain it effectively.

Student engagement, and engagement drivers

The present study conceptualizes student engagement as a persistent and comprehensive psychological state characterized by enthusiasm, commitment, and deep involvement in academic pursuits (Schaufeli et al., 2006). This conceptualization extends beyond specific situations, individuals, or actions (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), encompassing the notion of intrinsic motivation. In this context, student engagement reflects a profound investment in one's studies, where individuals derive meaning and value from their work and become immersed in the learning process. While engagement and motivation are distinct constructs, they exhibit a reciprocal relationship (Martin et al., 2017).

Research indicates that academic engagement in higher education is associated with positive outcomes (Xu et al., 2023), such as improved career prospects (Jiang et al., 2024). Engagement also involves the development of advanced cognitive abilities (Kahu, 2013). Furthermore, it correlates with reduced incidences of delinquency, substance use, and depression. Engagement also positively influences students' overall well-being, satisfaction, and sense of fulfillment (Plantade-Gipch et al., 2023a).

Various factors have been identified as influencing student engagement, including beliefs about success and failure, planning abilities, self-efficacy, locus of control, and interactions with peers and family. Additional determinants encompass financial circumstances, educational background, teaching methods, and assessment practices (Plantade-Gipch et al., 2023a), as well as social and institutional relationships (Senior & Howard, 2015). Moreover, students' social, academic, and institutional integration significantly influences their adjustment to university life (Tinto, 1975), which, in turn, affects their academic performance (Richardson et al., 2012). Interactions between students and professors are recognized as promoting engagement and cognitive competence in the classroom (Kim & Lundberg, 2016), while the quality of the relationships with university staff is associated with academic engagement (Snijders et al., 2019). Furthermore, students' perceptions and assessment of their educational experiences are also shaped by the degree to which their higher education institution engages with them and addresses their needs and concerns (Chirikov, 2016; Elken et al., 2016; Snijders et al., 2021).

Numerous studies on children have revealed positive correlations between the quality of relationships, well-being, academic success, and even health (Cornelius-White, 2007; Kim, 2021; Plantade-Gipch & Serina-Karsky, 2024). In the context of higher education, students' perceptions of their relationships with university staff positively influence their interactions within the educational environment (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022), as well as their levels of engagement, academic performance, and critical thinking (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2023). Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between student engagement and academic achievement, with actively engaged students typically outperforming their peers (Picton et al., 2018). These students are also more likely to achieve higher levels of success (Lee, 2014; Lei et al., 2018), and experience greater well-being (Wong et al., 2024).

Relationship quality, and students' engagement

The quality of relationships within the university can foster collaboration between students and faculty, enhance the institution's reputation, and ensure ongoing connections with alumni (e.g., returning to share expertise, mentoring students, participating in events, and contributing financially). Furthermore, it can help maintain an inclusive community (Weerts et al., 2010; Kantanen, 2007). In this regard, higher education institutions stand to gain from cultivating strong ties with their students, which can promote engagement, well-being, supportive behaviours, and loyalty, even after their academic journey has concluded (Xerri et al., 2018).

When students perceive a high-quality relationship with university staff, it positively influences their behaviours and enhances the overall relational dynamics between students and their educational institution (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022). Understanding the foundational relationships that shape the connection between higher education institutions and their students is also crucial for the development of effective educational strategies and practices.

Relationship quality, student engagement, and cultural context

The relationship between the quality of interactions with university staff and student engagement may vary across cultural contexts. By acknowledging and adapting to these cultural differences, universities can strengthen relationships, improve retention rates among students from diverse

backgrounds, and cultivate a diverse, supportive environment (Mittelmeier et al., 2018). Such understanding can also inspire critical reflection on values and practices within a globalized context, where European students are increasingly mobile, pursuing their studies and future careers across borders. Moreover, European policies are becoming increasingly interconnected, particularly in the field of education.

Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, our collaborating researchers from the UK and the USA were unable to continue with the study. However, we proceeded with two institutions in France and The Netherlands. The potential differences in cultural, educational, and social contexts could influence the quality of relationships and student engagement. Moreover, these two countries may differ in the dynamics of relationships between students and faculty or staff, along with variations in the expectations placed on students and the support available to them. For example, in terms of hierarchical perception, The Netherlands is distinguished by a low Power Distance Index (PDI = 38), whereas France exhibits a higher score (PDI = 68) (Hofstede, 1983). Additionally, in France, the emotional aspect of the teacher-student relationship remains a contentious issue, and the incorporation of educational psychology into teacher training has been approached cautiously (Virat, 2016). In contrast, in The Netherlands, teachers often adopt a facilitating role, promoting learning and monitoring students' academic progress (Staveren & Wunderink, 2007). Given these contrasting approaches, comparing the two countries is valuable for gaining a deeper understanding of relationship quality and student engagement (Pillay & James, 2015).

However, there is limited scientific literature comparing student-faculty relationships in higher education across countries, and the concept of academic engagement can vary. In a study involving 26,648 undergraduate students from various countries, Shcheglova (2018) found that academic engagement involves both educational processes and cultural traditions. Kandiko's (2008) study showed that American students were more engaged, active in learning, and collaborative in student-faculty interactions compared to their Canadian counterparts. Additionally, in a study including 2,092 participants from nine countries, primarily undergraduate students, Santos et al. (2022) found that student engagement was lower in countries with higher development and lower unemployment rates. Finally, in a study with 3,420 participants from 7th to 9th grades across 12 countries, Lam et al. (2016) found that parental and teacher support were positively correlated with student engagement (Lam et al., 2016).

These findings suggest that student engagement is closely tied to the quality of relationships and, in certain contexts, may also be shaped by cultural factors. This prompts an important question: does the influence of relationship quality on student engagement take on different forms across European countries? Further research is needed to gain deeper insights into the dynamics between students and faculty, particularly within distinct cultural contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Snijders and colleagues (2019, 2020, 2022) have conducted studies examining the quality of relationships and student engagement in higher education, emphasizing the significant role that interactions between students and faculty or staff members play in shaping the overall educational experience. Our research explores the relationships between students and various university staff

members, including teachers, lecturers, administrative personnel, and counsellors. The study aims to identify strategies for strengthening the connection between students and their higher education institutions while assessing student engagement in their studies and commitment as alumni. Additionally, we compared Dutch and French students' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their universities.

Relationship quality

To investigate the relationship between the quality of relationships among students, their professors, and university staff and students' engagement in their studies, we used the Higher Education Relationship Quality Scale (HERQ) by Snijders et al., which builds on the work of Roberts et al. (2003). This scale assesses relationship quality, including trust and affect (Snijders et al., 2022). By adapting this tool specifically to the higher education context, Snijders et al. (2018) laid the methodological foundation for research examining the link between relationship quality and student engagement. Using the HERQ scale, we aimed to investigate how students' trust in the honesty and benevolence of university staff influences their academic engagement. Honesty-based trust refers to the faith that students place in their faculty and staff, their sincerity, reliability, and competence in fulfilling their roles effectively. Benevolence-based trust captures students' perception of the staff's positive intentions and genuine care for their well-being.

According to social exchange theory, individuals, including students and teachers, engage in relationships with the implicit expectation of mutual benefits (Ahmad et al., 2023). In this context, when students trust their teachers, they may develop a sense of reciprocity that motivates them to invest more in their studies. Mutual trust fosters a positive dynamic in which students are more willing to dedicate time and effort to their academic pursuits. Furthermore, students who trust their professors and staff members are more likely to engage in their studies, as they feel secure, supported, and respected.

Engagement in studies can also be better understood by examining other aspects of relationship quality, such as affective commitment, students' emotional attachment, or their sense of connection with faculty and staff. Conversely, student engagement may be negatively affected by perceived affective conflicts with staff (e.g., lack of trust or poor relationship quality), which can lead to heightened stress, distraction, or avoidance behaviours. Additionally, satisfaction, defined as the degree of contentment with interactions with faculty and staff, plays a crucial role in fostering engagement. High affective commitment and satisfaction, combined with low affective conflict, are likely to enhance engagement, as students tend to invest more time and effort in environments where they feel valued and supported. Positive relationships can also enhance students' sense of connection, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation to engage in their studies, as outlined by the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). To further explore the link between relationship quality and student engagement, we investigated these key relational variables in our study.

Student Engagement and Loyalty

By conducting a targeted study on student engagement in their academic pursuits, we could deepen our understanding of how and to what extent university relationships impact student

engagement. The student engagement construct is typically categorized into three key subdimensions: vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour refers to maintaining high levels of energy and mental resilience while studying, demonstrating a strong willingness to invest effort, and persisting in the face of challenges. Dedication involves a deep commitment to one's studies, characterized by enthusiasm, inspiration, creativity, and a sense of self-worth. Absorption describes a state of full immersion in academic work, where students lose track of time and find it difficult to disengage from studying (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Examining the relationship between the quality of relationships at university and student engagement can provide valuable insights into enhancing students' emotional investment and commitment behaviours to their institution, commonly referred to as student loyalty (Liu, 2024). Loyalty typically encompasses positive attitudes and intentions that lead to favourable word-of-mouth, such as recommending a program or institution to others. From the perspective of the client relationship theory, building meaningful connections between an organization and its customers is key to nurturing satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. In the university context, student loyalty may be influenced by their interactions with faculty and staff, as well as their trust in the institution.

Hypotheses

The study raises the following question: "what is the quality of relationships between students and academic faculty and staff in the higher education institutions under study, and to what extent do these relationships predict student engagement?" We hypothesized that higher relationship quality would be positively associated with student engagement and loyalty. Additionally, based on cross-cultural research, we anticipated cultural differences between Dutch and French students in terms of relationship quality and engagement. Consequently, the study included one dependent variable (student engagement) and three independent variables (relationship quality, cultural background, and student loyalty).

Methods

Participants

Our sample was drawn from a survey of Dutch and French students attending higher education institutions focused on applied sciences. All quantitative data were gathered before the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in January and February 2020. The Dutch sample included 407 students, while the French 394 students (Dutch/French: $N = 407/ N = 394$, $M_{age} = 22.2/ 22.9$, $SD_{age} = 5.5/4.5$; 59.5%/ 83.9% female). For the analysis, only 363 French participants were retained due to substantial missing data in 13 questionnaires and incomplete responses on 18 relationship quality scale items (4.8% of the data). In the Dutch sample, 377 participants were included, as 30 participants did not complete the engagement and loyalty scale items (7.4% of the data) (Gomila & Clark, 2022; Little & Rubin, 2019). The socio-demographic data collected included age, gender, and level of study (Table 1).

Table 1

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the French and Dutch Participants (n = 831).

	French participants (n = 394)	Dutch participants (n = 437)
Age (M, SD)	22.9 (4.48)	22.2 (5.5)
Genre		
Female	86.3% (n = 340)	59.5% (n = 260)
Male	11.7% (n = 46)	40.04% (n = 175)
Other	2% (n = 8)	46% (n = 2)
Study level		
Bachelor	60.1%	100%
Master	39.9%	0%
Current year of study	3.39 (1.45)	3 (1.28)

Note. Other gender = students do not identify with male or female or did not want to answer the question.

Measures

Relationship Quality

Adapted to university students, the Higher Education Relationship Quality Scale (HERQ) questionnaire comprised 15 items designed to assess relationship quality (Snijders et al., 2019). Students rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In a study conducted with 150 Dutch alumni, the model's five-factor structure was confirmed: trust in university staff's honesty ($\alpha = .87$), trust in their benevolence ($\alpha = .85$), affective commitment ($\alpha = .85$), feelings of conflict with staff ($\alpha = .91$), and satisfaction ($\alpha = .95$) (Snijders et al., 2018). All three subscales demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas exceeding .70 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Student Engagement

Participants completed the student short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-S) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) which measures three subdimensions: vigour, dedication, and absorption. The scale consists of 17 items, each rated on a scale from 0 (never) to 6 (always). A study conducted with German students ($N = 2,620$) supported the three factors structure: vigour ($\alpha = .86$), dedication ($\alpha = .83$), and absorption ($\alpha = .70$) (Gusy et al., 2019), indicating good internal consistency for all three subscales.

Student Loyalty

Student loyalty was assessed using five items developed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001). Participants rated the items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (do not agree) to 7 (do agree). In a study involving 1,162 German students (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001), the model's structure was validated across three constructs: students' perceptions of service quality ($\alpha = .81$), students' trust in the institution's staff ($\alpha = .85$), and students' commitment to the institution ($\alpha = .91$). All three

subscales demonstrated good internal consistency. Table 2 presents the participants' scores on the three scales.

Table 2

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Participant Scores

Variables	Subfactors	French Mean (SD)	Dutch Mean (SD)	French and Dutch Mean (SD)
Relationship quality		69.01 (17.58)	73.84 (13.28)	71.52 (15.67)
	Trust in benevolence	14.04 (3.29)	14.92 (3.99)	14.50 (3.69)
	Trust in honesty	13.13 (4.15)	15.08 (3.42)	14.14 (3.91)
	Satisfaction	14.50 (4.11)	14.40 (4.08)	14.45 (4.09)
	Affective commitment	12.73 (4.25)	14.28 (4.11)	13.54 (4.25)
	Affective conflict	14.57 (4.95)	15.15 (4.38)	14.87 (4.67)
		83.10 (15.84)	74.46 (17.63)	78.61 (17.33)
	Absorption	27.32 (6.55)	23.54 (7.17)	25.35 (7.13)
Student engagement	Dedication	27.92 (5.42)	24.71 (5.72)	26.25 (5.80)
	Vigour	27.87 (5.62)	26.22 (6.28)	26.96 (5.96)
		28.03 (6.08)	25.27 (6.73)	26.59 (6.57)
	Quality of services	11.36 (2.70)	10.51 (2.85)	10.92 (2.80)
Student loyalty	Trust	5.05 (1.70)	4.57 (1.56)	4.80 (1.65)
	Commitment	11.64 (2.54)	10.19 (3.13)	10.89 (2.95)

Procedure

Students received an email containing a *Qualtrics* link to the online survey, which took ten to fifteen minutes to complete. The survey was available in both Dutch and French. It included a brief overview of the study's purpose, and participants provided informed, voluntary consent to participate. To ensure consistency with the original Dutch version, the French questionnaire was translated using a forward-backward translation method. The research design was quantitative and correlational. The data were analysed using *JASP* software. Normality and reliability were assessed. To ensure validity, both exploratory and confirmatory analyses were conducted. Correlations were computed between the factors identified in our samples. Multiple linear

regressions were performed to gain a deeper understanding of how the independent variables (relationship quality, student loyalty) influence the dependent variable (student engagement) across the two cultural backgrounds (independent variable). Mann-Whitney *U* tests were used to compare the Dutch and French groups in terms of age, gender, and level of study. Additionally, Student *t*-tests were conducted to compare Dutch and French students across the measured variables.

Results

Normality, comparability of samples, and reliability analysis

The age and gender of the students do not follow a normal distribution, as indicated by Kurtosis and Skewness indices exceeding the range of -2 to 2 . In contrast, all other variables follow a normal distribution in the Dutch sample. For the French sample, two items deviate from normality. It is common to observe such deviations in certain items. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the variables cannot be considered normal, especially with a sample size as reasonable as ours. Therefore, it appears acceptable to proceed with parametrical statistical analyses under the assumption of normality, while remaining mindful of the potential limitations associated with deviations from normality.

The Mann-Whitney *U* tests reveal a small difference in the mean age of the students, with the French being slightly older than their Dutch counterparts ($W = 91,925.00$, $p < .001$, $r = .20$). The test also indicates a small difference in gender distribution, with the French group having slightly more women and fewer men compared to the Dutch group ($W = 99,954.00$, $p < .001$, $r = .31$). The Chi-square test shows significant differences between the two groups of students in terms of their level of study ($\chi^2 = 200.843$, $p < .001$). In the French group, 220 students are at the bachelor's level, while 143 are at the master's level. In contrast, all Dutch students are at the bachelor's level. Although the two groups are comparable in terms of age and gender, they differ significantly in their level of study. Consequently, we restricted our comparison to bachelor's students only. The reliability analysis indicates that all the scales demonstrate good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .72 to .93 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011) (see Table 3).

Table 3

Scales' Reliability

Variables		Relationship quality					Engagement			Loyalty
Subdimensions		TB	TH	SAT	ACOMM	ACON	VI	DE	AB	
Cronbach's α	Dutch bachelor students	.72	.84	.87	.85	.91	.74	.85	.81	.86
	French bachelor students	.88	.82	.93	.85	.92	.83	.89	.86	.87

Note. VI = Vigour, DE = Dedication, AB = Absorption, TB = Trust in benevolence, TH = Trust in honesty, SAT = Satisfaction, ACOMM = Affective commitment, ACON = Affective conflict.

Invariance, exploratory, and confirmatory factor analysis

We performed homoscedasticity tests on the two samples. The results of Levene's test suggest that certain subdimensions are not measured consistently in the French and Dutch samples: trust in benevolence ($p = .01$), trust in honesty ($p < .001$), affective conflict ($p < .001$), absorption ($p = .01$), dedication ($p = .03$), vigour ($p = .02$), and commitment to the institution ($p < .001$). In contrast, the other dimensions show consistent measurement across the two samples, as evidenced by non-significant Levene's test results.

Since the homoscedasticity tests revealed that the two samples were frequently invariant, we performed both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to ensure the validity of the findings. For the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), the number of factors was determined by using the elbow method (i.e., visually identifying the point of inflection on the inertia gain curve) and the Kaiser-Guttman criterion (eigenvalues greater than 1). Only factors that accounted for at least 5% of the variance were retained. For the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), model fit was assessed using the following statistics: Chi-square, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). According to Hu and Bentler (1999), an RMSEA value below .06 and CFI/TLI values above .95 indicate a good model fit. However, values close to these thresholds (e.g., $RMSEA < .10$ or $CFI/TLI > .90$) may still be considered acceptable depending on the overall fit indices obtained (Kenny et al., 2015).

The relationship quality scale was expected to comprise five factors based on previous research (Snijders et al., 2018). However, the EFA identified two factors in both the French ($p < .001$, $RMSEA = .10$, $TLI = .90$) and Dutch samples ($p < .001$, $RMSEA = .11$, $TLI = .91$). These factors reflect students' perceptions of trust, support, and the university's commitment to their well-being. The confirmatory factor analysis confirmed a good fit for this model ($RMSEA = .08$, $TLI = .96$) (see Table 4).

The engagement scale was expected to comprise three factors based on previous research (Gusy et al., 2019). The EFA identified three factors in both the French ($p < .001$, $RMSEA = .07$, $TLI = .92$) and Dutch samples ($p < .001$, $RMSEA = .07$, $TLI = .94$). However, the CFA revealed a poor model fit for the common items across both samples ($RMSEA = .16$, $TLI = .83$). Reducing the number of items to four improves the model fit ($RMSEA = .08$, $TLI = .98$) (see Table 4). These factors reflect students' perceptions of their motivation and appreciation for their studies.

The loyalty scale was expected to comprise three factors based on previous research (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). However, an EFA reveals a single factor for both the French ($p < .001$, $RMSEA = .19$, $TLI = .85$) and the Dutch sample ($p < .001$, $RMSEA = .28$, $TLI = .71$). However, the CFA revealed a poor model fit ($RMSEA = .15$, $TLI = .80$). Reducing the number of items to four improves the model fit ($RMSEA = .15$, $TLI = .93$, $CFI = .98$, $SRMR = .03$) (see Table 4). While the RMSEA slightly exceeds the optimal range, it remains within an acceptable threshold. These factors reflect students' satisfaction with the university and academic programs.

Consequently, the factor analyses reveal that the scales in our samples assess the following three variables for both the French and Dutch groups: (1) students' perceptions of trust and support from the university (referred to as 'trust'); (2) students' motivation and appreciation for their studies

(referred to as 'motivation'); and (3) students' satisfaction with their university and academic program (referred to as 'satisfaction').

Table 4

Confirmatory Factor Analysis: Students' 1) Trust, 2) Motivation, and 3) Satisfaction with University and Academic Programs

Scales	χ^2 value	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA value
Trust	89.61	14	< .001	.98	.96	.08
Motivation	12.16	2	= .002	.99	.98	.08
Satisfaction	36.86	2	< .001	.98	.93	.15

Note. CFI = Comparative Fit Index, TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index, RMSEA value = Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation. Results in bold show that the model is significant.

Correlations, linear regression, comparison of the groups

The correlation analyses suggest that the perceptions of bachelor students are similar in both the French and Dutch samples. Specifically, for both groups, there are highly significant positive and moderate correlations between trust and motivation ($r_{Dutch} = .50, p < .001$; $r_{French} = .51, p < .001$), and between trust and satisfaction ($r_{Dutch} = .69, p < .001$; $r_{French} = .72, p < .001$).

The results of the multiple linear regressions are very similar for the two samples of bachelor students in predicting motivation based on trust: ($F_{Dutch}(1, 375) = 123.02, p < .001$) and ($F_{French}(1, 361) = 140.07, p < .001$). Both results are highly significant. Additionally, in the Dutch sample for each 1-unit increase in student trust, student motivation increases by .29 ($p < .001$), with the model accounting for 24.8% of the variance in motivation. In the French sample for each 1-unit increase in student trust, student motivation increases by .28 ($p < .001$), with the model explaining 25.7% of the variance in motivation.

Table 5

Comparison of French and Dutch Bachelor Students on the Three Variables: Students' (1) Trust, (2) Motivation, and (3) Satisfaction with the University

Variables	t-value	df	p	Cohen's d
Trust	-1.29	631	.20	-.11
Motivation	10.98	631	< .001	.91
Satisfaction	8.31	631	< .001	.69

The results of the multiple linear regressions are quite similar for the two samples of bachelor students in predicting motivation based on students' satisfaction: ($F_{Dutch}(1, 375) = 302.17, p < .001$) and ($F_{French}(1, 361) = 289.86, p < .001$). Both results are highly significant. Additionally, in the Dutch sample for each 1-unit increase in satisfaction, the motivation increases by .61 ($p < .001$), with the model accounting for 44.5% of the variance in motivation. In the French sample

for each 1-unit increase in satisfaction, motivation increases by .56 ($p < .001$), with the model explaining 41.7% of the variance in motivation. The independent t -tests show that French bachelor's students have a significantly stronger perception of motivation compared to Dutch bachelor students ($t = 10.98$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, French bachelor students are moderately and significantly more satisfied than their Dutch counterparts ($t = 8.31$, $p < .001$) (Table 5).

Post hoc mediation analysis

Table 6

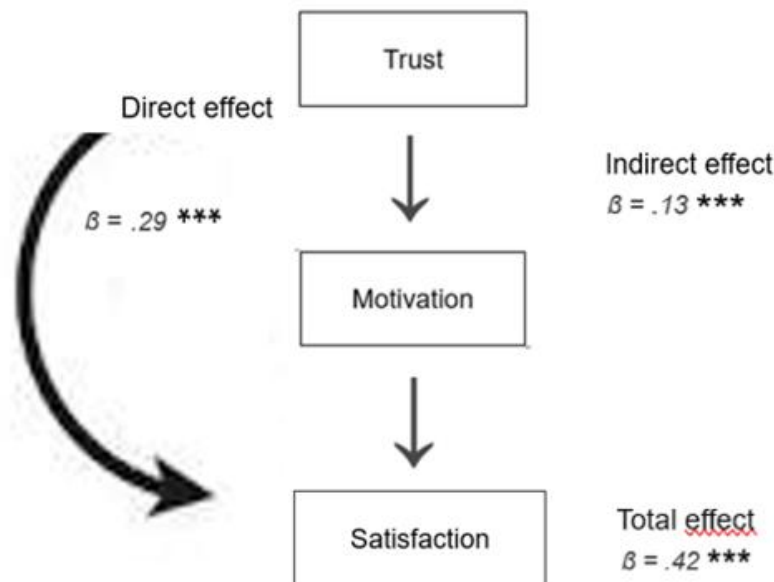
Mediation of Bachelor's Students' (1) Motivation Between (2) Their Trust, and (3) Satisfaction.

Pathway	z-value	p-value	Estimate
Direct effect Trust → Satisfaction	18.02*	< .001	.29
Indirect effect Trust → motivation	10.91**	< .001	.13
Total effect Trust → Satisfaction	23.82***	< .001	.42

* = direct effect; ** = indirect effect; *** = combination of the effects.

Figure 1

Visual Model of the Results: Relationships Between Trust, Motivation, and Student Satisfaction



Since student engagement is conceptually closely related to intrinsic motivation (Martin et al., 2017), and motivation emerged as a variable in our study following the EFA and CFA analyses, we examined its mediation role. Bachelor students' perceptions of their institution as being

trustworthy significantly predict 62.2% of their satisfaction (direct effect). Additionally, students' motivation, together with their perception of the institution as trustworthy, explains 18% of the variance in their overall satisfaction, considering both direct and indirect effects (see Table 6).

Discussion

In summary, all analysed variables are interrelated. Students' trust and motivation, strongly predict satisfaction – with motivation being the most influential factor. French bachelor's students show significantly higher levels of motivation compared to their Dutch peers. They also have a moderately more positive satisfaction. Furthermore, students' motivation, together with their perception of the institution as trustworthy, explains 18% of the variance in their overall satisfaction.

Predictors of students' satisfaction with their university and academic program

Parametric statistics were employed in this study, allowing for confident inferences about a broader population. Although the invariance analysis indicated the need for caution with certain scale items, the substantial efforts dedicated to validating the scales and understanding the variables under investigation allowed us to draw cautious yet robust conclusions. For both samples, bachelor's students' overall satisfaction with their university and program is predicted by their perception of the institution as trustworthy, supportive, and concerned with their well-being, as well as by their motivation and appreciation for their studies. These findings underscore the importance of interpersonal interactions within educational settings, particularly students' trust in the university staff, their perception of integrity (honesty), positive intentions, and genuine concern (benevolence). These results align with those reported by Snijders and colleagues between 2019 and 2022, which identified perceived trust, support, and concern for students' well-being as key emotional dimensions of the educational relationship. Previous research (e.g., Fuentes et al., 2014) also suggests that these relationships play a role in students' socialization processes. Faculty and staff members significantly shape students' higher education experiences as key figures with whom they interact. Therefore, perceived trust, support, and genuine concern for well-being – key elements of relationship quality – may play an important role in fostering students' engagement and healthy development.

Our findings also highlight the importance of students staying motivated, feeling appreciative of their studies, and maintaining a positive attitude toward their university and academic program. In our study, having a sense of purpose, feeling inspired and proud of one's studies, and looking forward to attending university are key dimensions of student engagement. These aspects reflect personal investment in education, and the significance students attach to it, which are also linked to intrinsic motivation. Motivation is recognized as a key factor influencing student engagement (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2021) and is associated with enthusiasm for academic pursuits (Plantade-Gipch et al, 2023a). Ensuring that students remain motivated and satisfied with their institution and academic program is crucial for higher education institutions (Helgesen, 2008). The hypothesis suggesting a positive relationship between relationship quality and student engagement is partially supported, as certain dimensions of these variables are correlated, and both contribute to explaining students' satisfaction with their university and academic programs. Furthermore, students' trust, their sense of support from the university, and their perception of the

institution's commitment to their well-being explain 62.2% of their overall satisfaction with the university and its academic programs.

Multiple factors can shape students' attitudes and behaviours, with some acting as mediators between variables. In our study, students' trust in the university, their sense of being supported, and the institution's genuine concern for their well-being positively influence their perception of their university and programs, with this effect being partially mediated by their motivation and their appreciation of their studies. Therefore, a significant portion of the variance remains unexplained, suggesting that other factors may also contribute to the relationship between these variables. Moreover, the mediation effect does not establish the direction of the relationship between students' perception of trust in the institution and their satisfaction with the university and academic program. For instance, a highly motivated student who values their studies may perceive greater trust, support, and concern for their well-being from the university, and, in turn, express a stronger satisfaction with the university and academic program than a less motivated student. The mediation effect also encourages us to consider that positive interactions with the university and its staff can be internalized by students, enhancing their personal and professional resources and attributes. Additionally, being highly motivated and appreciative of studies may inspire students to pursue ambitious goals, acting as a driving force behind their academic efforts.

In this study, a student who is motivated and appreciative of their study is someone who finds meaning in their academic pursuits, feels inspired by them, takes pride in their achievement, and has a positive attitude towards attending university. These aspects also represent dimensions of student engagement. Moreover, in this research, a student who values their university and academic program is not only more likely to recommend them to others but also to stay engaged with their faculty. They would also be inclined to choose the same university again if given the opportunity. These aspects represent dimensions of student loyalty. The results indicate that the hypothesis suggesting a relationship between student engagement and student loyalty is partially supported, as the dimensions of these variables are correlated and interconnected through mediation.

An exploratory study was conducted to investigate the potential cultural differences between Dutch and French students within the context of our research. Compared to their Dutch counterparts, the French bachelor's students demonstrated higher motivation and were more appreciative of their studies. Additionally, they felt more satisfied with their university and academic program than the Dutch students. These findings may suggest a need for the Dutch institution to support student motivation and satisfaction with the university and its academic programs.

Furthermore, French students may be influenced by a cultural context that values higher education, emphasizing academic achievement as a pathway to success and social mobility, thereby fostering student motivation and a sense of belonging to higher education institutions. Family expectations, including pressure to obtain a university degree, can further motivate them. Additionally, French students might perceive employment prospects as more competitive, encouraging them to focus on their studies. As noted by Santos et al. (2022), lower student engagement has been observed in countries with lower unemployment rates, which could be relevant when comparing The Netherlands and France.

Limitations and further research

While our findings on relationship quality and student engagement in two countries hold significant implications for educational policies, certain limitations must be acknowledged. This study relied on only two national and institutional samples, restricting the generalizability of the results. Both countries share European cultural backgrounds and educational systems. Therefore, there is a lack of geographical diversity, which raises questions regarding the international representativeness of the findings. Also, the student samples from the participating countries may not reflect the diversity of the global student population, thereby limiting the external validity of the study. Furthermore, the ability to compare student engagement across different countries is reduced, which in turn narrows the scope of the comparative analysis. Additionally, participants were selected based on availability rather than through random sampling, further limiting the generalizability of the findings. The samples predominantly consisted of humanities and social sciences students, which may not fully represent the broader student population. Methodologically, missing responses on certain scales could have affected the statistical analyses, potentially impacting the precision and power of the results. Therefore, caution is required when interpreting the data. Future studies should explore relationship quality and student engagement across a wider range of higher education institutions worldwide to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics (Pillay & James, 2015).

Linking with international studies

To support the relevance of the present study, a deeper overview of international research on engagement and relationships at university was conducted. Research in various higher education contexts, both European and non-European, highlights the importance of psychological, relational, and institutional factors in student satisfaction and engagement. The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), carried out in Australia and New Zealand, shows that student engagement is positively correlated with satisfaction and academic achievement, particularly when students are in an environment that is both academically demanding and institutionally supportive (Coates, 2009). In our study, conducted with samples of European students, their motivation and trust in the institution are significant predictors of their overall satisfaction, with motivation being the most important factor. Both studies suggest that a supportive institutional climate acts as a positive lever for motivation, engagement, and student satisfaction.

Qualitative studies further explore the relational dynamics within higher education institutions. In Malaysia, Singh (2018) shows that participating in extracurricular activities in partnership with university staff strengthens the sense of belonging and engagement among international students by reducing hierarchical distance in a context characterized by high power distance. A similar dynamic is observed in a study conducted in Ireland (Curran, 2017), where a partnership-based program was delivered to both students and staff. This program helped reduce the separation between the two groups, promoting interaction and warmth in the learning process. Such cooperation helps to transform the educational relationship by fostering engagement through reduced hierarchical distance and valuing student participation.

These empirical findings are echoed in a meta-analysis by Li and Xue (2023), which reviewed 148 international studies from various continents. Three determinants of student engagement are highlighted: the quality of student-teacher relationships, positive teacher behaviors (guidance, feedback, encouragement), and positive emotions experienced by students. All these factors are linked to interactions within the university and contribute to more relaxed and enjoyable learning conditions, as well as stronger emotional engagement. Teacher support, recognition, a sense of belonging, and integration into learning communities are also associated with greater satisfaction and better academic outcomes.

Despite different methodologies and cultural contexts, these studies show that student engagement, motivation, and satisfaction are significantly related to the quality of relationships within the institution (with professors, staff, and the overall university community). An institutional climate based on trust, support, recognition, and collaboration is important for fostering active student participation, well-being, and success. It therefore seems important to rethink relationships in higher education not in terms of vertical transmission, but in terms of partnership, co-construction, and mutual support. This does not exclude intellectually stimulating challenges, that can fuel motivation.

Although several studies have examined the effect of teacher-student relationship quality on student engagement, few have explored this link from an intercultural perspective. The present study addresses this gap. By showing that students' motivation, together with their perception of the institution as trustworthy, mediates their overall satisfaction in their studies, this study provides a more contextualized understanding of the mechanisms underlying student engagement. It opens new avenues for international research and highlights the importance of adapting educational interventions to cultural specificities.

Practical Implications

Our findings suggest that students from France and the Netherlands are attuned to the emotional aspects of their relationship with their university, particularly in terms of their trust in the institution. Consequently, investing in faculty and staff training focused on relational competencies, such as emotional intelligence and conflict resolution, could be highly beneficial (Plantade-Gipch, 2019). Existing research suggests that special attention should be given to first-year undergraduate students, as they may experience heightened stress due to the challenges of adaptation and the increased responsibilities of emerging adulthood. Creating support groups and mentoring networks among students may help them monitor and sustain their motivation, especially during periods of decline, making it highly beneficial. Moreover, encouraging educators to actively listen to the challenges faced by students may also provide valuable support (Plantade-Gipch et al., 2023a).

Therefore, this study contributes to both theory and practice. On a theoretical level, it broadens the understanding of the motivational and relational dimensions of student engagement. It also underscores the role of the socio-emotional skills of university staff. Additionally, it offers an intercultural perspective that enriches existing knowledge. On a practical level, the results support the development of targeted interventions: training for teachers and staff, peer mentoring, and

motivation support systems. These strategies are suggested to promote student engagement, well-being, and academic success.

Furthermore, it would be valuable to explore how factors such as self-efficacy (Masson & Ratenet, 2020) and anxiety may influence student success and well-being. Additionally, examining contextual factors like post-graduation employment rates, and university tuition fees could offer insights into the diverse roles faculty members play, from knowledge transmitters to sources of support. Finally, further research on how cultural differences shape teaching practices and educational relationships could help address the varying needs of students from different countries.

Conclusions

By understanding how students perceive their relationships with university staff and how these perceptions influence their engagement, higher education can more effectively adapt to students' needs. This study compared French and Dutch students, revealing that trust and motivation are important factors in fostering students' satisfaction with their university and programs. The findings also suggest that educational practices from different countries can complement each other, such as balancing student autonomy with the need for structure. Further research could explore cross-country differences in relationship quality and their impact on student engagement (Martínez-Fernández & Gaudiano, 2015).

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