

The Relationship Between Lecturer–Student Interaction and Students’ Learning Motivation in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the relationship between lecturer–student interaction and learning motivation among Diploma in Early Childhood Education students at a Malaysian college. This quantitative research employed a survey design and involved 103 students selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using the student–Instructor Relationship Scale (SIRS) and the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-C 28). Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0, employing Pearson correlation and independent t-tests. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between lecturer–student interaction and learning motivation ($r = .495$, $p < .05$). However, no significant differences in learning motivation were found based on gender ($t(101) = .876$, $p > .05$) or age ($t(101) = -.604$, $p > .05$). This study contributes meaningfully to the higher education landscape in Malaysia and Asia by underscoring that high-quality lecturer–student relationships serve as a crucial foundation for fostering student learning motivation. The study also contributes to the limited body of literature concerning lecturer–student interaction and learning motivation among diploma-level students in Malaysia, thereby providing contextual insight into the importance of relational teaching practices within Southeast Asian higher education environments. The findings also highlight the need to strengthen teaching practices that prioritise empathy, openness, and continuous support to enhance students’ holistic learning experiences. The implications of this study may assist policymakers and institutional leaders in designing academic development programmes that emphasise lecturers’ interpersonal competencies. Overall, the study reinforces those positive relational dynamics not only influence students’ motivation but also their emotional well-being and meaningful engagement in learning.

Keywords: Lecturer–Student Interaction, Motivation, Students, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between lecturers and students plays a vital role in shaping meaningful learning experiences within higher education institutions. Positive interaction not only enhances the effectiveness of knowledge delivery but also fosters a learning environment that supports students’ emotional and social development. When students perceive their relationship with lecturers as warm, respectful, and supportive, they are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of motivation and greater willingness to engage actively in learning. Therefore, understanding how lecturer–student relationships influence learning motivation is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes, particularly in balancing theoretical knowledge with professional practice.

In the context of higher education in Southeast Asia, lecturer–student relationships have been identified as a key factor influencing student motivation and academic success. In China, a study by Pan & Yao (2023) revealed that positive teacher–student relationships not only enhance academic engagement but also foster student interest and focus in the learning process, despite challenges such as large class sizes and limited time. These findings are consistent with Liu (2024), who emphasised that strong lecturer–student relationships exert both direct and indirect effects on academic engagement through increased social support and reduced academic stress. When lecturers are able to establish an environment that is emotionally and academically supportive, students tend to be more motivated, more actively involved, and more likely to achieve improved academic outcomes.

In Malaysia, efforts to strengthen lecturer–student relationships have increasingly gained attention in higher education, particularly in programmes that emphasise humanistic and professional development. Ros Aiza Mohd Mokhtar, Latifah Abdul Latiff, and Abd Hakim Mohad (2020) conducted a study on learning motivation in an ethics and civilization appreciation course among students at University Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), along with their perceptions of course lecturers. The findings revealed that students demonstrated high motivation to learn the course, which was attributed to the lecturers’ strong character and teaching competence. Similarly, Bhakti Pemana et al. (2023) found that caring lecturers and a conducive learning environment significantly enhanced student motivation.

Thus, lecturer–student relationships represent a key element in determining the effectiveness of teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Positive and supportive relationships help create conducive learning environments while nurturing students’ emotional, social, and academic development. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 (MEB-HE) emphasises the importance of fostering high-quality lecturer–student relationships and student-centred learning environments (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2015). The Blueprint underscores the need to develop holistic, balanced, and resilient graduates through meaningful learning interactions between lecturers and students. Hence, the quality of lecturer–student relationships not only support academic achievement but also play a crucial role in enhancing students’ emotional and social well-being.

Moreover, teaching approaches grounded in empathy, effective two-way communication, and attentiveness to students’ needs have been shown to strengthen students’ sense of belonging and commitment to learning (Hettinger, Lazarides, & Schiefele, 2024). In educational contexts, strong lecturer–student relationships also help students adapt to academic and social challenges, thereby increasing their self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation to persist in learning (Di Lisio et. al, 2025).

In Malaysia, concerns regarding declining student motivation in higher education have increasingly attracted attention among educators and researchers. Several studies have suggested that distant lecturer–student relationships and limited communication may negatively affect students’ learning engagement and motivation. This phenomenon underscores the importance of fostering meaningful interpersonal interaction and supportive communication between lecturers and students in higher education institutions. A study by Prananto, Cahyadi, Yustikasari, and Hinduan (2025) found that students’ perceptions of lecturer support were significantly related to learning engagement and motivation, whereas a lack of support reduced students’ enthusiasm. Likewise, Adi Badiozaman, Leong, and Jikus (2019) demonstrated that positive lecturer–student interactions significantly contribute to increased student engagement in learning.

Despite various initiatives to strengthen lecturer–student relationships in higher education, student motivation remains below satisfactory levels. Distant lecturer behaviour, non-interactive teaching methods, and insufficient emotional support are among the contributing factors to declining motivation. This situation highlights the need to further investigate the extent to which lecturer–student relationships influence learning motivation. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine the relationship between lecturer–student interaction and learning motivation among students in Malaysia, as well as to understand its implications for teaching and learning quality in higher education institutions. In contemporary Southeast Asian higher education settings, supportive lecturer–student interaction is increasingly recognised as an important factor influencing students’ emotional engagement, academic confidence, and motivation toward learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lecturers are not merely responsible for delivering knowledge, but also act as facilitators who play a crucial role in shaping students’ intrinsic motivation. Previous research has shown that lecturer–student relationships and lecturers’ supportive behaviours are significantly associated with students’ learning engagement and motivation in higher education contexts (Ma et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the quality of interaction between lecturers and students is an important determinant of student engagement and academic motivation.

In this context, the ability of lecturers to create positive interactions and a supportive learning environment is essential in stimulating students’ interest, self-confidence, and commitment toward the learning process. Effective

lecturer–student interaction has been found to enhance students’ engagement and academic outcomes through improved emotional support and perceived relationship quality (Roorda et al., 2011; Quin, 2017). Positive communication, empathy, and responsiveness from lecturers contribute to stronger engagement and deeper learning approaches among students. This perspective is also consistent with contemporary higher education motivation frameworks, particularly Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasises the importance of relatedness, autonomy and competence in strengthening students’ intrinsic motivation and academic engagement.

Meanwhile, research in higher education has consistently demonstrated that high-quality lecturer–student relationships are positively associated with student engagement, academic motivation, and learning satisfaction. For example, studies have shown that teacher–student relationship quality significantly predicts student engagement, which subsequently contributes to improved academic performance and motivation (Roorda et al., 2011). This highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained academic involvement.

From a theoretical perspective, Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory provides a useful framework for understanding the impact of lecturer–student relationships on motivation. The theory posits that supportive and secure relationships with significant figures, such as lecturers, create psychological safety that encourages students to engage actively in learning, take academic risks, and develop resilience in facing challenges.

In addition, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) further explains that students are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are fulfilled within the learning environment. In higher education contexts, supportive lecturer–student interaction may therefore function as an important relational mechanism that strengthens students’ sense of belonging, emotional security and commitment toward academic learning.

Therefore, strong lecturer–student relationships not only improve academic performance but also contribute significantly to students’ emotional well-being, engagement, and motivation in higher education.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.3.1 To identify the relationship between lecturer–student interaction and the learning motivation of Diploma in Early Childhood Education students.

1.3.2 To determine the differences in learning motivation among Diploma in Early Childhood Education students based on gender.

1.3.3 To determine the differences in learning motivation among Diploma in Early Childhood Education students based on age.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

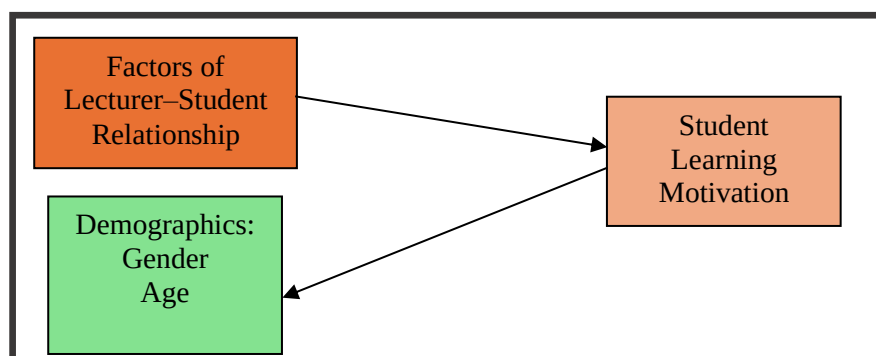


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Lecturer–Student Interaction and Student Learning Motivation

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework developed by the researcher to explain the relationships among the variables involved in this study. Specifically, the framework emphasizes how lecturer–student interaction affects

students' learning motivation within the context of the Diploma in Early Childhood Education. Positive interactions between lecturers and students are expected to enhance students' interest, commitment, and determination in learning, whereas weak or ineffective relationships may negatively impact their motivation levels.

Furthermore, the conceptual framework incorporates demographic factors such as gender and age to examine whether significant differences exist in students' motivation based on these backgrounds. This comparative analysis is important as it can clarify the role of demographic factors in shaping students' perceptions of lecturer–student relationships and their learning motivation. Hence, the framework not only serves as a guide for testing the relationships among the primary variables but also provides a foundation for understanding the influence of demographic factors in the context of early childhood education more comprehensively.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a survey design, a common approach in social research that allows empirical data to be collected directly from respondents through distributed questionnaires. This method was chosen because it enables the examination of patterns and relationships among variables, while also providing a representative overview of the population based on the study sample. As argued by Creswell (2014), surveys are suitable for investigating trends and associations among studied factors, whereas Zuriani et al. (2022) emphasise that the survey method is applicable across various fields to obtain specific information.

For analytical purposes, data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to ensure reliability and accuracy of the findings. Two types of analyses were conducted: descriptive and inferential. Descriptive analysis was used to present the respondents' profiles through percentages and frequency distributions. Inferential analysis involved Pearson correlation to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between lecturer–student interaction and students' learning motivation. Additionally, independent t-tests were conducted to examine differences in motivation levels based on respondents' gender and age. The use of inferential statistics is crucial for hypothesis testing and allows interpretations that extend beyond mere description. Although the present study primarily employed correlation and independent t-test analyses, these statistical approaches remain appropriate for addressing the research objectives and identifying significant relational patterns between lecturer–student interaction and learning motivation among diploma students.

Population and Sample

The population of this study comprised 140 students enrolled in the Diploma in Early Childhood Education programme at a college in Malaysia. To determine an appropriate sample size, the researcher referred to the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, a widely used reference in social research to ensure that the sample effectively represents the population. Based on this guideline, 103 students were selected as study respondents. This sampling not only meets statistical validity requirements but also ensures that the study findings are highly reliable and can be generalised to the entire population of students in the programme. The following table presents the Krejcie & Morgan reference for determining the study sample size:

Table 1: Krejcie & Morgan (1970) Table for Determining Sample Size

Population	Sample
120	92
130	97
140	103
150	108
160	113

Research Instruments

To ensure that the data collected aligned with the research objectives, the researcher employed several instruments that have been tested and proven to possess high validity and reliability. These instruments were selected because they are appropriate for measuring the main constructs of the study. The study instruments consisted of three sections: Section A covered respondents' demographics, Section B included items from the Student–Instructor Relationship Scale (SIRS), and Section C comprised the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-C 28) College Version. The use of established and widely recognised instruments, namely the Student–Instructor Relationship Scale (SIRS) and the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-C 28), strengthened the reliability, validity, and consistency of the findings obtained in this study. A description of each section is provided below:

Section A: Demographics

This section collected information on respondents' gender, age, and semester of study.

Section B: Student–Instructor Relationship Scale (SIRS)

Developed by Gary Creasey, Pat Jarvis, and Elyse Knapcik in 2009, the SIRS consists of 36 items designed to measure the relationship between lecturers and students. The questionnaire was adapted linguistically to ensure relevance to the study's respondent demographics. The instrument includes two domains: lecturer relationship dimension (11 items) and lecturer-related anxiety dimension (8 items). A seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree) was used to allow respondents to express their opinions and evaluations for each item.

Section C: Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-C 28) College Version

The academic motivation instrument used in this study was developed by Vallerand et al. (1992). The scale is based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasises three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The instrument contains 28 items divided into seven subscales: intrinsic motivation to know, intrinsic motivation to accomplish, intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, external regulation, and amotivation. A seven-point Likert scale (1 = Not True at All; 7 = Completely True) was used for respondents to indicate their responses.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis in this study was conducted to present the frequency distribution and percentages of respondents based on the collected demographic information, namely gender and age.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Gender

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	21	20.4
Female	82	79.6
Total	103	100

The gender analysis revealed that the majority of respondents in this study were female students, totalling 82 (79.6%), while male students accounted for 21 (20.4%). These findings indicate that the Diploma in Early Childhood Education programme is predominantly attended by female students, reflecting a common trend in the early childhood education field, which typically attracts higher female participation. This pattern illustrates a natural inclination among women towards disciplines that emphasise care, nurturing, and foundational child education, thereby explaining the gender imbalance observed in this programme.

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Age

Age	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
18-20	70	68.0
21 and above	33	32.0
Total	103	100

Regarding the age distribution of respondents, the study findings indicate that 68.0% of students were aged 18–20 years, while 32.0% were aged 21 years and above. These results suggest that the majority of diploma students at the institution are young individuals who have recently completed secondary education before progressing to higher education. This age composition also reflects the typical enrolment pattern of diploma students in Malaysia, where most students commence their studies immediately after finishing secondary school. Consequently, this provides insight into their current level of motivation and academic readiness, which is still being shaped through learning experiences at the higher education level.

Inferential Analysis

i) Relationship Between Lecturer–Student Interaction and Student Learning Motivation

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Coefficient for the Relationship Between Lecturer–Student Interaction and Student Learning Motivation

Variable		Learning Motivation
Lecturer–Student Interaction	Pearson correlation	.495
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	103

$$p < 0.05$$

Table 4 illustrates the relationship between lecturer–student interaction and students’ learning motivation. The study findings indicate a significant positive correlation between lecturer–student interaction and learning motivation ($r = 0.495$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that higher-quality lecturer–student relationships were associated with higher levels of students’ learning motivation. These results support the view that academic relationships grounded in empathy, appreciation, and effective communication can foster a positive learning climate and enhance students’ willingness to engage actively in the learning process.

The findings are consistent with previous studies by Adibah and Fatimah (2010), which reported a significant relationship between lecturers’ nonverbal readiness behaviors and students’ motivation. However, verbal readiness behaviours were found not to have a significant impact on motivation. Similarly, Norazlina and Azlina (2020) emphasise that elements of appreciation, moral support, and lecturer attentiveness play a crucial role as catalysts for student engagement and the development of intrinsic motivation.

Beyond reinforcing global literature, these findings reflect a crucial contextual reality within Malaysian and Southeast Asian higher education. In collectivistic educational landscapes, student learning motivation is deeply intertwined with relational dynamics. Attributes such as interpersonal respect, emotional availability, and lecturer approachability are not secondary traits; rather, they serve as vital catalysts that enhance students’ psychological readiness to engage and thrive academically.

These findings can also be explained through Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), which asserts that stable, responsive, and trusting relationships between lecturers and students provide a foundation for psychological security. When students perceive a supportive and non-threatening relationship, they are more likely to take learning risks, ask questions confidently, engage actively in class, and demonstrate higher intrinsic motivation. Hence, positive nonverbal interactions and empathetic behaviours from lecturers not only strengthen the lecturer–student relationship but also serve as a critical foundation for enhancing students’ learning motivation.

The moderate positive relationship identified in this study further suggests that lecturer–student interaction may

function as an important pedagogical mechanism that encourages students to develop stronger academic confidence, emotional engagement, and sustained participation in learning activities.

ii) Significant Differences in Student Learning Motivation Based on Gender

Table 5: Summary of Independent t-test for Student Learning Motivation Based on Gender

Gender	N	Min	Standard Deviation	t	df	Sig.
Male	21	5.3214	.29386	.876	101	.383
Female	82	5.2274	.46797			

$p > .05$

The t-test results indicate no significant difference in learning motivation between male and female students ($t(101) = 0.876$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that gender does not have a statistically significant effect on students' motivation. These findings are consistent with the study by Adibah and Fatimah (2010), which also reported no significant differences in motivation between male and female students. Similarly, Jamil (2019), in the context of foreign language learning, supports this finding by showing that student motivation is not influenced by gender but rather depends on students' interest and engagement in the learning process.

However, these results should be interpreted with caution, as research by Cabras et al. (2023) reported variations in motivation based on gender, with female students showing higher tendencies toward intrinsic motivation and identified regulation compared to males. Additionally, Khairulzaim and Tan (2023) found that gender differences in motivation may emerge in specific contexts, particularly during unexpected challenges such as a pandemic. This suggests that the role of gender in influencing motivation is contextual and not static, depending on the situation, field of study, and learning experiences. These findings indicate that students' learning motivation may be influenced more strongly by the quality of educational experiences and supportive learning environments than by demographic characteristics alone.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the unequal gender distribution within the study sample, where female students represented the majority of respondents. Although this distribution reflects the actual demographic composition of the programme, broader gender representation may provide more balanced comparative findings in future studies.

iii) Significant Differences in Student Learning Motivation Based on Age

Table 6: Independent t-test Summary of Student Learning Motivation Based on Age

Age	N	Min	Standard Deviation	t	df	Sig.
18-21	70	5.2286	.44576	-.604	101	.547
21 and above	33	5.2846	.42694			

$p > .05$

Table 6 presents the differences in student learning motivation based on age. The analysis indicates no significant difference in learning motivation between age groups ($t(101) = -.604$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that age does not play a significant role in influencing learning motivation among the study respondents. In other words, students, regardless of their age, share a similar level of readiness and drive to achieve academic success.

These findings are consistent with the study by Farah Waheeda and Majaheed (2021), which found that the intrinsic motivation of first-year students (aged 18–20 years) did not differ significantly from that of senior students, indicating that motivation is more influenced by environmental factors and academic support rather than chronological age.

However, this result contrasts with the study by Bhakti Permana et al. (2023), which reported variations in motivation based on age among nursing students. Such differences may be attributed to the specific context of

the field of study and the varying levels of professional maturity across disciplines. In the Malaysian higher education context, the uniformity of academic structures, workload, and standardized teaching approaches across age groups may explain why age-related differences in motivation are minimal. This underscores the notion that the learning environment may have a stronger influence on motivation than demographic factors alone.

The findings therefore reinforce the importance of creating inclusive, empathetic, and student-centred classroom environments that support students' emotional well-being and academic engagement regardless of age differences.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study underscores that positive lecturer–student relationships play a crucial role in fostering high levels of learning motivation among students. Interactions grounded in trust, emotional support, empathy, and effective communication were found to enhance students' engagement and willingness to participate actively in learning activities. Although no significant differences were identified based on gender or age, the findings suggest that learning motivation is influenced more strongly by the quality of interpersonal relationships and supportive learning environments than by demographic factors alone.

The study also contributes to the growing discourse on student engagement and motivation within Malaysian and Southeast Asian higher education contexts by emphasising the importance of relational and student-centred teaching practices. The findings reinforce the view that lecturer–student interaction should not merely be regarded as a social component of teaching, but also as an important pedagogical factor influencing students' emotional well-being, academic engagement, and motivation toward learning.

Therefore, higher education institutions should emphasise the development of lecturers' interpersonal competencies, empathy, and supportive communication skills as strategic approaches to strengthening student motivation and holistic educational experiences. The study also carries important implications for the educational context in Malaysia and the broader Southeast Asian region, particularly in efforts to cultivate inclusive, supportive, and human-centred learning cultures.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted within a specific higher education context involving Diploma in Early Childhood Education students at one institution in Malaysia. Therefore, the findings may reflect the characteristics of the studied educational environment. Additionally, the pronounced gender imbalance (79.6% female) reflects a systemic demographic reality in Early Childhood Education programmes across Southeast Asia. However, this severe skew potentially underpowers the independent t-test's ability to capture more nuanced masculine motivational drivers. Future multi-site research should actively oversample male cohorts to provide a more balanced and comprehensive comparative analysis of academic motivation. Nevertheless, the study contributes meaningful insight into the role of lecturer–student interaction in enhancing students' learning motivation within Malaysian higher education settings.

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