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The Impact of Student–Teacher Relationships on the Global Competence of Chinese International Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT: *Student–teacher relationships shape international students’ intercultural development, yet limited evidence exists for Chinese students in Malaysia. This study examines how student–teacher relationships influence global competence among this population. Using a survey design, four relationship dimensions (academic support, communication quality, emotional support, and cultural sensitivity) and four competence dimensions (issue analysis, perspective taking, intercultural interaction, and action orientation) were measured. The SEM results show that supportive relationships significantly predict global competence. Cultural sensitivity most strongly predicts perspective taking and issue analysis, followed closely by academic support. Communication quality most strongly predicts intercultural interaction, whereas emotional support most strongly predicts action orientation. This study has practical implications for educators and policy makers seeking to strengthen intercultural learning environments in higher education.*

Keywords: Chinese international students, global competence, intercultural education, quality education, student–teacher relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Driven by global higher education internationalization, cross-border student mobility has increased rapidly. Malaysia has become a prominent regional study destination, with Chinese students forming the largest international student group in local universities (Education Malaysia Global Services, 2024; Teng & Cosier, 2024). This growing international student population highlights the need to improve cross-cultural learning outcomes in multicultural Malaysian campus contexts.

In higher education, global competence has become an essential graduate outcome. Universities prioritize nurturing students’ cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral capabilities to adapt to diverse global environments (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022; Deardorff, 2020; Lu et al., 2025). Relevant studies confirm that university intercultural learning experiences significantly promote students’ global readiness and intercultural development (Lu et al., 2025; Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024).

However, Chinese international students in Malaysia frequently face obstacles to cultural adaptation, academic adjustment and social integration, which restrict their global learning development (Singh & Xue, 2025, Zhao et al., 2026). This finding indicates that mere international campus exposure cannot guarantee competence growth, and that supportive campus resources are urgently needed.

As a core campus interpersonal resource, student–teacher relationships critically shape international students’ learning and development. Positive teacher support cultivates students’ cross-cultural cognition, open-mindedness,

interaction ability and global thinking, which constitute core global competence dimensions (Tinto, 2017; Tran, 2020). Supportive student–teacher interactions help students overcome cultural and linguistic barriers, enrich global learning experiences, and enhance their global awareness and intercultural adaptability (Guo & Laokulrach, 2023; Killick & Foster, 2021). Therefore, student–teacher relationship quality serves as a key predictor of global competence development among Chinese international students in Malaysia.

Most existing studies in Malaysia have focused on international students' general adaptation or satisfaction, but have paid less attention to the specific dimensions of student–teacher relationships and how these dimensions may influence students' global competence. In addition, much of the research on student–teacher relationships and global competence has been conducted in Western contexts, which makes this study more necessary in the context of Malaysia education.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study aims to address two questions:

RQ1: To what extent is student–teacher relationship quality associated with overall global competence among Chinese international students in Malaysia?

RQ2: Which student–teacher relationship dimensions most strongly predict each dimension of global competence?

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions by disaggregating student–teacher relationships and examining their differential effects on distinct global competence dimensions within the Malaysian context.

Theoretically, this study refines intercultural learning models by clarifying the relational mechanisms that connect classroom interpersonal experiences to measurable global competence outcomes (Deardorff, 2020; Killick & Foster, 2021). Practically, the findings inform faculty development and curriculum design by highlighting targeted relational practices rather than generic internationalization goals (Tran, 2020). For university policymakers and institutional leaders, the results provide empirical evidence for prioritizing teacher training for culturally inclusive and globally oriented education (Teng & Cosier, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global competence is widely recognized as a core graduate outcome and a central theoretical construct in higher education internationalization. The OECD (2018) provides the most authoritative multidimensional definition, framing global competence as an integrated system encompassing global knowledge, multicultural values, cross-cultural skills, and responsible behavioral tendencies. This framework emphasizes individuals' capacity to analyze global issues, respect cultural diversity, and engage in socially responsible global participation, and has become a dominant reference for international research.

Nevertheless, global competence research still faces theoretical and methodological limitations. No unified curriculum integration standard exists for embedding multidimensional global competence components into university teaching. Inconsistent assessment tools also create fragmented empirical findings across different cultural contexts.

Scholarly consensus has been reached on the conceptual definition of global competence, yet empirical applications remain inconsistent. Guo et al. (2024) synthesized the literature and identified three commonly adopted core dimensions: cognitive knowledge, emotional attitudes, and practical skills. While this three-dimensional structure provides a basic analytical framework, it also reveals a key limitation: global competence measurements are highly context-specific and lack cross-cultural standardization. Fragmented assessment criteria reduce comparability across samples and hinder generalisable conclusions.

Traditional linear understandings of intercultural learning have also been challenged. Huang and Cheung (2024) highlight the dynamic and curvilinear relationship between intercultural exposure and global competence development. They confirm that increased cross-cultural contact alone does not guarantee competence growth. Effective interpersonal support and positive relational learning environments are essential for the transformation of intercultural experience into sustainable global competence.

Overall, the literature clarifies the basic conceptual structure of global competence but contains two major limitations. First, existing measurement frameworks lack standardization and cross-context adaptability. Second, most studies overlook interpersonal relational factors as critical conditions shaping competence formation, resulting in incomplete theoretical explanations of global competence development.

This study adopts the OECD (2018) multidimensional framework as its theoretical foundation. Compared with simplified three-dimensional models, the OECD framework comprehensively integrates knowledge, values, skills, and behavioral components. Its internationally recognized standardized structure resolves measurement fragmentation and enhances empirical rigour. Most importantly, the framework's emphasis on global issue analysis, cross-cultural understanding, and responsible global behavior aligns closely with Malaysia's multicultural campus environment and the learning characteristics of Chinese international students. This contextual fit enables the present study to address the underexamined role of relational factors in global competence formation.

Student–teacher Relationships and Global Competence Development

Student–teacher relationship quality is a fundamental interpersonal factor influencing university students' academic progress and holistic psychological development (Tormey, 2021). In cross-cultural higher education settings, this relational influence becomes more pronounced. International students often lack local social networks and rely heavily on campus interpersonal resources for adaptation and learning support (Zhao et al., 2026).

High-quality student–teacher interactions include academic guidance, emotional care, and culturally inclusive communication. Such support effectively

reduces acculturative stress, alleviates culture shock, and sustains international students' psychological well-being in unfamiliar host environments (Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024). Teachers' culturally sensitive and inclusive behaviors also shape students' intercultural cognition and multicultural values, laying a solid foundation for long-term cross-cultural adaptation and global literacy development (Thin, 2025, Lin, 2026).

Empirical research consistently confirms the positive association between supportive student–teacher relationships and intercultural developmental outcomes. Wang et al. (2020) reported that intercultural sensitivity and interactive willingness cultivated through campus faculty–student engagement positively predict international students' adaptation quality. Informal relational experiences beyond formal curriculum teaching serve as a vital driver of individual cross-cultural growth. Accordingly, student–teacher relationships function as essential contextual carriers for nurturing intercultural attitudes and enhancing overall global competence (Steele & Leming, 2022, Lin, 2026).

Mechanism-focused studies further elaborate on the relational effects on competence development. Teng and Cosier (2024) note that teachers' global values and instructional attitudes directly shape students' global cognition and cross-cultural value systems. Huang et al. (2025) highlight the mediating role of self-efficacy between intercultural learning experience and global competence, confirming that relational and emotional support fundamentally determine global learning effectiveness. Similarly, Thin (2025) verified that inclusive teaching practices and harmonious student–teacher interactions facilitate international students' intercultural competence acquisition and cross-cultural understanding.

Despite consistent evidence for the benefits of positive student–teacher relationships, the literature contains notable theoretical and empirical limitations. First, intercultural learning effects are not linear or unconditional. Huang and Cheung (2024) demonstrate that passive cross-cultural exposure without adequate teacher guidance and emotional support leads to diminishing returns and may even hinder global competence growth. Intercultural learning outcomes therefore depend heavily on high-quality student–teacher relational support, yet few studies systematically differentiate the unique influence of distinct relationship dimensions.

Second, relational advantages do not automatically translate into competence growth, with effects constrained by institutional contexts (Thin, 2025). Deficient global competence curriculum design and limited teacher intercultural professionalism weaken the potential benefits of positive student–teacher relationships. Such contextual variations explain inconsistent relational effects across educational settings and indicate a lack of targeted local verification within universal intercultural learning models.

In the context of multicultural higher education in Malaysia, local research remains limited and underdeveloped. Kaur and Sidhu (2009) identify common academic communication and campus integration barriers among Chinese international students in Malaysian universities. However, their analysis remains descriptive and does not explore the underlying influencing mechanisms. Specifically, the local literature has not clarified how four key student–teacher

relationship dimensions shape global competence formation among Chinese international students. The relational pathway connecting student–teacher interaction and global competence in Malaysia’s cross-cultural context therefore remains theoretically unclear and empirically unexplored.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Derivation

This study adopts Deardorff’s (2006) process model of intercultural competence as the overarching framework, which outlines a sequential pathway: intercultural attitudes, knowledge comprehension, behavioral skills, and external outcomes. Within this model, the student–teacher relationship dimensions function as contextual inputs that activate different stages of this developmental sequence. Therefore, this study proposes H1: Student–teacher relationship quality is positively associated with overall global competence among Chinese international students in Malaysia.

Deardorff (2006) positions intercultural attitudes as the foundational stage. Openness, respect, and curiosity, shaped by campus relational environments, are necessary precursors to effective cross-cultural behavior. Teachers’ emotional support reduces acculturative stress and minimizes defensive responses (Mokhtar et al., 2025), enabling students to initiate communication and participate actively despite uncertainty. Empirical evidence confirms that emotional support uniquely predicts behavioral initiative and cross-cultural engagement willingness (Guo & Laokulrach, 2023; Tormey, 2021). Thus, this study proposes H2a: Emotional support and care positively predict action orientation.

Deardorff (2006) argued that intercultural skills, such as listening, observing, and cultural evaluation, develop through authentic interactive practice. Classroom communication quality, characterized by timely feedback and inclusive language, provides structured opportunities for skill rehearsal. Constructive teacher feedback creates a low-anxiety environment for practicing cross-cultural communication (Cancino & Nuñez, 2023; Tran, 2020), and communication quality uniquely predicts intercultural interaction frequency beyond emotional and academic support (Gutiérrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023; Mokhtar et al., 2025). Therefore, H2b states that communication and interaction quality most strongly predict intercultural interaction.

Deardorff’s (2006) knowledge and comprehension stage connects attitudes and behavioral skills, requiring an understanding of cultural assumptions and an analysis of global issues from multiple perspectives. Academic support directly facilitates this cognitive stage, providing analytical tools that emotional support alone cannot supply. Empirical studies confirm that academic scaffolding enhances students’ ability to analyze global issues multiculturally (Teng & Cosier, 2024; Thinh, 2025), and serves as the strongest predictor of cognitive analytical outcomes (Wang et al., 2020; Steele & Leming, 2022). Hence, H2c is as follows: Academic support most strongly predicts issue analysis.

Deardorff (2006) highlights that appropriate intercultural behavior can be learned through observing credible cultural role models. Teachers who demonstrate cultural sensitivity, acknowledge differences, avoid ethnocentrism, and reflect on personal biases, exemplify ideal intercultural outcomes. Such

inclusive practices significantly predict perspective-taking capacity (Thin, 2025; Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024), surpassing general emotional and communication support as the strongest predictor of understanding alternative cultural viewpoints (Huang et al., 2025). Integrating social learning theory with Deardorff's modeling perspective supports H2d: Cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness most strongly predict perspective taking.

The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

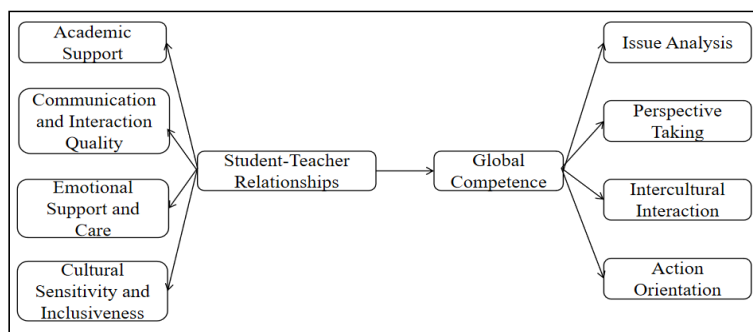


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework

METHOD

This study adopted a survey design to examine the impact of student-teacher relationships on the global competence of Chinese international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions. A cross-sectional survey approach was used to collect data through questionnaires. This approach enables the identification and statistical testing of relationships among variables within a specific time frame (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design allowed for a rigorous analysis of the structural relationships between the student-teacher relationship dimensions and the global competence dimensions. Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling, were conducted to validate the measurement model and test the hypothesized paths.

Sampling and Participants

A stratified convenience sampling method was employed to ensure representative coverage across Malaysian universities with Chinese international student populations. Stratification followed a hierarchical structure to reflect key characteristics of the higher education landscape.

First, geographical location was used as the primary stratum, with a focus on universities situated in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, which hosts a concentration of Chinese international students because of its rich international educational resources and institutional diversity. Second, institutional type served

as the next level of stratification, dividing institutions into public and private universities. Third, the academic program was adopted as the final stratification criterion, categorizing students according to their professional fields, including business, information technology and engineering, social sciences, and other fields, to capture potential discipline-specific differences in educational experience. By incorporating these three stratification levels, the sampling strategy enhanced population representativeness while reducing potential sampling bias (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

The inclusion criteria included mainland Chinese citizens, being full-time undergraduate students enrolled in a Malaysian university, having completed at least one academic semester in Malaysia, and being 18 years of age or older. Students who were exchange participants were excluded from the study to maintain consistency in terms of academic exposure and learning environment.

A total of 436 questionnaire responses were initially collected through the online survey. Before formal data analysis, data screening and cleaning procedures were conducted to ensure data quality. Among the 436 responses, 8 invalid cases were excluded because of excessive missing values, univariate outliers, and careless or repetitive answer patterns. After data cleaning, a final valid sample of 428 responses was retained for the main statistical analysis.

The demographic profile of the valid respondents indicated that 51.2% were female and 48.8% were male, with a mean age of 23.4 years. The participants represented diverse academic disciplines, including business (32.8%), information technology and engineering (30.6%), social sciences (25.3%), and other fields (11.3%). Their length of stay in Malaysia ranged from six to thirty-six months, reflecting varying degrees of adaptation to the host educational and cultural environment. The final sample size of 428 met the minimum recommended threshold for SEM analysis (Kline, 2023).

Data Collection Procedures

Before the formal data collection, a pilot test was conducted to refine the questionnaire and validate its preliminary reliability and validity.

Three invited experts assessed the facial and content validity of the initial 33-item scale. The experts are two university lecturers specializing in international education and one senior researcher in intercultural psychology. They evaluated each item based on appropriateness, relevance, clarity, and alignment with the research context of Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education. The experts provided the following specific feedback:

Two items were identified as overlapping in content: “My teachers are supportive of my educational efforts” (STR2) and “My teachers encourage me to obtain achievement” (STR17). Both items were found to measure similar aspects of teacher encouragement and support; one item was identified as having wording that was too complex for participants with intermediate English proficiency: “I can analyze how cultural stereotypes influence people’s judgments” (GC3).

In accordance with the feedback of the experts, the two overlapping items (STR2 and STR17) were merged into one item: “My teachers are supportive of

my educational efforts and achievement” (STR2). The complex item (GC3) was rephrased using simpler language: “I can analyze how cultural stereotypes influence people’s judgments” to “I can understand how cultural stereotypes affect the way people think about others”.

Moreover, a sample of 50 Chinese international students studying in Malaysia was used to examine item readability, contextual suitability, and internal consistency of the scale. The pilot results revealed that the overall Cronbach’s alpha value of the revised 32-item questionnaire was 0.852, indicating good preliminary reliability.

The final questionnaire comprised three sections: demographic information, student–teacher relationships (16 items, four dimensions), and global competence (16 items, four dimensions). All the items used a 5-point Likert scale. The demographic variables included sex, major, length of stay, and language ability.

All the items were adapted from validated instruments. The student–teacher relationship items were sourced from established scales (Den Brok et al., 2005; Pianta, 1999). The global competence items were adapted from the OECD (2018) framework. The questionnaire was designed in a bilingual English–Chinese format to eliminate language bias (Beaton et al., 2000; Wild et al., 2005).

Notably, while the OECD framework contains many components, this study selectively adopts four dimensions on the basis of Deardorff’s (2006) process model. Issue analysis, perspective taking, intercultural interaction, and action orientation align with Deardorff’s sequence: cognition, attitude, skills, and behavioral outcomes. This selection fits the Malaysian Chinese international student context, with a focus on individual intercultural learning shaped by campus relationships rather than macrolevel global knowledge. This ensures high measurement pertinence and contextual validity.

The questionnaire items were entered into the online survey platform WENJUANXING to create the electronic questionnaire. This platform was selected because of its strong data security and confidentiality features, which help protect respondents’ personal information and ensure data privacy. The survey link was distributed online via WeChat, a widely used social media platform among Chinese students, which facilitated efficient dissemination and helped reduce social pressure and interviewer bias associated with face-to-face data collection. Data collection was conducted from September 2025 to December 2025. A total of 436 questionnaires were collected and included in the final analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

All the statistical analyses in this study were conducted using SPSS 29 and AMOS 26 to ensure methodological rigor and analytical accuracy. Before hypothesis testing, the data underwent a systematic process involving screening, reliability analysis, validity assessment, and model testing.

First, data cleaning and reliability testing were performed. The dataset was examined for missing values, outliers, and normality assumptions following the procedures recommended by Hair et al. (2010). After the data were cleaned, 428

valid questionnaires were used for the subsequent data analysis. The internal consistency reliability of each construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Second, descriptive and correlational analyses were conducted. Descriptive statistics summarized participants' demographic characteristics and the distribution of the main study variables. The mean and standard deviation were calculated as well. Subsequently, Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) were computed to explore the bivariate relationships among the dimensions of student–teacher relationships and global competence. These preliminary analyses provided an overview of the tendencies and interconnections among key variables before model estimation.

The third stage involved measurement model validation using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS. Convergent validity was assessed on the basis of standardized factor loadings (λ), composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), indicating satisfactory convergence (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). Discriminant validity was examined by comparing the square root of the AVE for each construct with the interconstruct correlations, ensuring that each latent variable measured a distinct theoretical dimension.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was carried out using a two-stage analytical approach. In the first stage, a first-order structural model was tested to examine the influence of the four dimensions of student–teacher relationships (academic support, communication and interaction quality, emotional support and care, and cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness) on the four dimensions of global competence (issue analysis, perspective taking, intercultural interaction, and action orientation). This analysis allowed for a detailed assessment of the specific predictive effects among the individual dimensions.

In the second stage, a higher-order structural model was estimated in which the student–teacher relationship was specified as a second-order latent construct reflected by its four first-order dimensions, and global competence was modeled as a second-order latent construct reflected by its four respective dimensions. This higher-order analysis assessed the overall influence of the student–teacher relationship on global competence at the construct level.

Model fit for both stages was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square/df ratio (χ^2/df), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), following the recommended cutoff criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999).

Ethical Considerations

This study obtained formal ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the author's affiliated university. All the research procedures strictly comply with institutional ethical review regulations and the professional ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018). The formally approved research design and data collection procedures meet standard ethical and academic requirements.

All the participants participated voluntarily and provided informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire. They were fully informed of the research purpose, the estimated time required to complete the questionnaire (approximately 5–10 minutes), and data usage, with clear assurance of personal anonymity, data confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the survey at any time without adverse consequences. No personal identifiable information was collected. All the research data were encrypted and securely stored solely for academic use, without commercial exploitation or public disclosure. All ethical procedures strictly followed institutional and BERA (2018) ethical principles.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Discriminant Validity

A total of 428 valid responses were retained. Descriptive analyses revealed that students reported moderately high levels across both the student–teacher relationship dimension and the global competence dimension. In particular, emotional support ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.63$) received the highest mean score. Among the global competence dimensions, perspective taking had the highest average level ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.63$). Reliability analyses indicated that all the subscales demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .86 to .91, confirming the reliability of the measurement instruments.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed that all four dimensions of student–teacher relationships were significantly and positively associated with each dimension of global competence ($r = .39-.63$, $p < .001$). Cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness demonstrated the strongest correlations with perspective taking ($r = .61$) and intercultural interaction ($r = .58$). The quality of communication and interaction was particularly related to intercultural interaction ($r = .59$). Emotional support and care correlated most strongly with perspective taking ($r = .56$), and cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness showed consistent positive associations across all global competence dimensions ($r = .44-.52$). These findings provide preliminary support for RQ1.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the measurement properties of the eight latent constructs. As shown in Table 1, standardized factor loadings (λ) for all the items ranged from .75 to .90, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of .50, and indicating that each item contributed substantially to its respective latent construct. Composite reliability (CR) values ranged from .852 to .927, surpassing the recommended minimum of .70, confirming strong internal consistency and construct reliability. The average variance

extracted (AVE) values ranged from .589 to .762, all above the .50 benchmark, providing evidence of satisfactory convergent validity. Moreover, on the basis of the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), the square roots of the AVE for all the constructs exceeded their interconstruct correlations, supporting adequate discriminant validity. Overall, the measurement model demonstrated robust reliability and validity, providing a solid foundation for subsequent structural equation modeling analyses.

The hypothesized SEM, in which the effects of the student–teacher relationship dimensions on global competence were examined, demonstrated good model fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.36$, CFI = .953, TLI = .946, RMSEA = .057, and SRMR = .045, all of which were within the recommended thresholds. Direct effect analysis indicated that all four dimensions—academic support ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), communication and interaction quality ($\beta = .25$, $p = .002$), emotional support and care ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$), and cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness ($\beta = .21$, $p = .005$)—significantly and positively predicted global competence. These findings confirm that supportive and culturally inclusive student–teacher interactions play a critical role in fostering global competence among Chinese international students in Malaysia.

Table 1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Construct	Standardized Factor Loadings (λ_1 – λ_4)	CR	AVE
Academic Support	.82, .85, .88, .80	.904	.702
Communication & Interaction Quality	.79, .81, .84, .77	.879	.645
Emotional Support & Care	.86, .88, .90, .85	.927	.762
Cultural Sensitivity & Inclusiveness	.76, .79, .82, .78	.867	.621
Issue Analysis	.83, .85, .80, .81	.893	.677
Perspective Taking	.78, .80, .82, .79	.875	.636
Intercultural Interaction	.80, .83, .85, .82	.895	.681
Action Orientation	.75, .77, .79, .76	.852	.589

Note. Model fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.36$; CFI = .953; TLI = .946; RMSEA = .057; SRMR = .045.

Structural Model Path

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was first conducted at the first-order level to examine the specific predictive relationships between the four dimensions of student–teacher relationships and the four dimensions of global competence. This analysis was designed to address RQ2, which seeks to identify which dimensions of student–teacher relationships most strongly predict each dimension of global competence.

Path analysis results for the first-order structural model are presented in terms of standardized path coefficients (β), standard errors (SE), and p-values.

Predicting Interpersonal Adaptability (IA): Academic support (AS) had a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.001$), as did classroom interaction (CI) ($\beta = 0.19, p = 0.004$) and cultural support (CS) ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.001$). Emotional support (ES) had a non-significant effect ($\beta = 0.12, p = 0.067$).

Predicting perseverance of effort (PT): AS ($\beta = 0.14, p = 0.021$), CI ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001$), ES ($\beta = 0.18, p = 0.006$), and CS ($\beta = 0.44, p < 0.001$) all significantly predicted PT.

Predicting Interaction with International Students (II): CI had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$), followed by CS ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.001$). The effects of AS ($\beta = 0.09, p = 0.083$) and ES ($\beta = 0.11, p = 0.074$) were not statistically significant.

Predicting Academic Outcomes (AO), namely, AS ($\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$), CI ($\beta = 0.15, p = 0.032$), ES ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.001$), and CS ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.001$), all significantly predicted AOs.

The model explained a substantial proportion of the variance in the endogenous variables: issue analysis ($R^2 = .42$), perspective taking ($R^2 = .51$), intercultural interaction ($R^2 = .48$), and action orientation ($R^2 = .46$). These R^2 values indicate that the four student–teacher relationship dimensions together accounted for between 42% and 51% of the variance in the respective global competence dimensions.

An examination of the path coefficients revealed differentiated predictive patterns across dimensions. Cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness emerged as the strongest predictors of perspective taking ($\beta = .44, p < .001$). Communication and interaction quality demonstrated the strongest effect on intercultural interaction ($\beta = .41, p < .001$). With respect to the issue analysis, cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness had the greatest standardized effect ($\beta = .31, p < .001$), followed closely by academic support ($\beta = .28, p < .001$). Emotional support and care exerted the strongest influence on action orientation ($\beta = .33, p < .001$).

Although not all paths reached statistical significance, each student–teacher relationship dimension demonstrated at least one significant positive effect on global competence. Overall, these findings indicate that different dimensions of student–teacher relationships uniquely contribute to different aspects of global competence development. Therefore, RQ2 is supported. The results are illustrated in Figure 2.

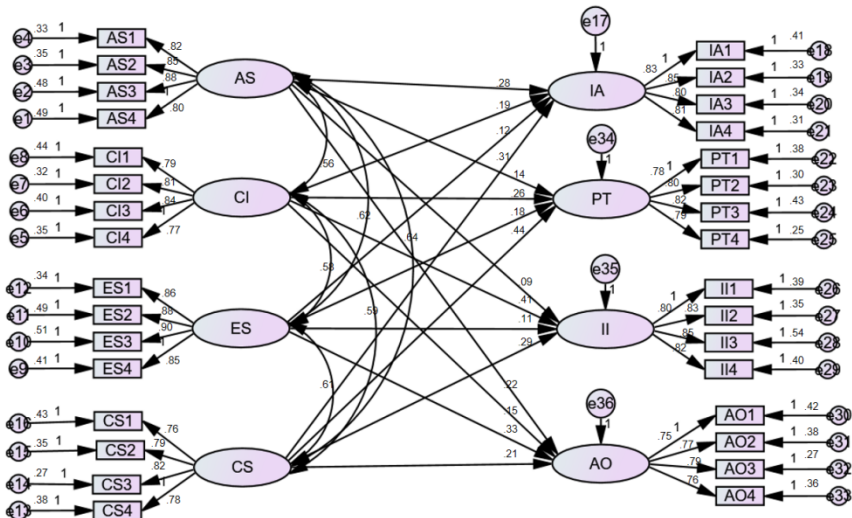


Figure 2: First-order Structural Model Path

Note. AS = academic support; CI = communication and interaction quality; ES = emotional support and care; CS = cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness; IA = issue analysis; PT = perspective taking; II = intercultural interaction; AO = action orientation

In the second stage of the analysis, a higher-order structural model was estimated to examine the overall relationship between student–teacher relationships and global competence at the construct level. In this model, the student–teacher relationship was specified as a second-order latent construct reflected by its four first-order dimensions (academic support, communication and interaction quality, emotional support and care, and cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness). Similarly, global competence was modeled as a second-order latent construct reflected by issue analysis, perspective taking, intercultural interaction, and action orientation.

The results of the higher-order SEM analysis indicate that the student–teacher relationship has a significant positive effect on overall global competence ($\beta = .68$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). The model explains 50% of the variance in global competence ($R^2 = .50$), suggesting that student–teacher relationships represent a substantial overall contributing factor in shaping students’ global competence.

These findings demonstrate that, beyond the differentiated dimensional effects identified in the first-order model, student–teacher relationships also function as a coherent higher-order construct that significantly predicts global competence at the overall level. Therefore, RQ1 is supported. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 3.

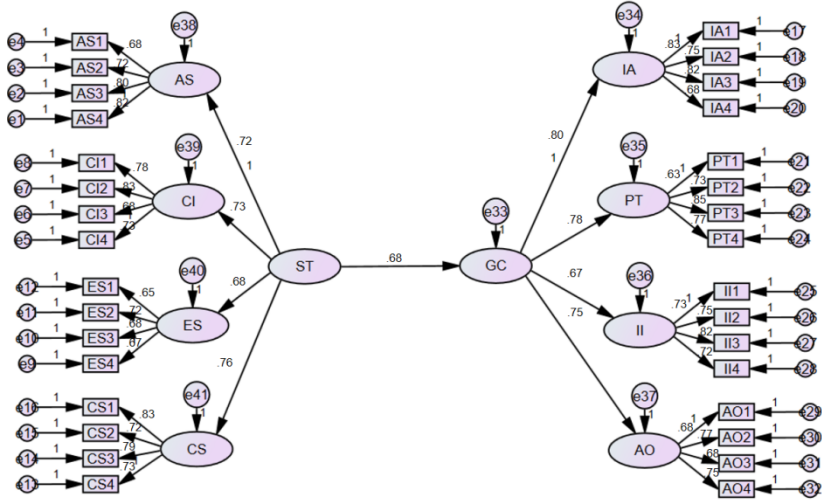


Figure 3: Second-order Structural Model Path

Note: AS = academic support; CI = communication and interaction quality; ES = emotional support and care; CS = cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness; IA = issue analysis; PT = perspective taking; II = intercultural interaction; AO = action orientation; ST = student–teacher relationship; GC = global competence.

Taken together, the two-stage analysis provides both fine-grained and holistic evidence. The first-order model reveals how specific relational dimensions uniquely predict particular competence outcomes, whereas the second-order model confirms the overarching structural association between student–teacher relationships and global competence.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that all four dimensions of student–teacher relationships were significantly and positively associated with all dimensions of global competence. Pearson correlation analysis revealed moderate to strong relationships, indicating that supportive and culturally responsive student–teacher relationships are closely linked to students' ability to analyze global issues, adopt diverse perspectives, engage in intercultural interaction, and demonstrate action-oriented global citizenship.

The positive association between supportive student–teacher relationships and global competence align with extensive prior research emphasizing the critical role of educators in shaping students' intercultural learning and global awareness (Amjad et al., 2023; Deardorff, 2020). According to Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence, supportive intercultural learning environments enable the acquisition of intercultural knowledge and skills.

Teachers play a central role in creating such environments through their instructional practices, communication styles, and emotional engagement with students. These findings provide strong empirical support for H1 and confirm that student–teacher relationships constitute a critical environmental factor in fostering global competence. The findings answered RQ1.

Beyond confirming direct associations, the findings also revealed that different relationship dimensions contribute uniquely to different aspects of global competence. These findings answered RQ2. Academic support appears particularly important for analyzing global issues, whereas emotional support contributes more strongly to motivational and behavioral aspects, such as action orientation. Cultural sensitivity plays a comprehensive role across the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral domains, highlighting its function as a foundational mechanism for global competence development.

Overall, the model explained 50% of the variance in global competence, indicating strong explanatory power. This level of explained variance suggests that student–teacher relationships are not merely peripheral influences but represent central developmental contexts that shape international students’ global competence. Regarding the hypotheses, H2a, H2b, H2c, and H2d were all supported by the data, as each hypothesized relationship dimension significantly and positively predicted its respective global competence outcome.

Emotional Support and Care

The findings demonstrated that emotional support was among the most influential predictors of global competence, particularly in relation to action orientation. Students who felt valued, understood, and supported by their teachers were more likely to develop a sense of responsibility toward global issues and engage in culturally responsive behaviors. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that emotionally supportive student–teacher relationships enhance students’ motivation, engagement, and intercultural development (Tran, 2020). Emotional support helps create a psychologically safe environment where students feel confident in their ability to participate in discussions, express their perspectives, and engage in intercultural learning (Guo & Laokulrach, 2023). Such supportive relationships are particularly important for international students, who often face cultural and academic adjustment challenges in unfamiliar environments (Tinto, 2017; Cancino & Nuñez, 2023). H2a predicted that emotional support and care would positively predict action orientation. This hypothesis was thus supported.

Furthermore, when teachers show care, empathy, and respect for students’ cultural backgrounds, they create inclusive learning environments that encourage intercultural dialog and reflection (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022). These relational conditions support the development of intercultural attitudes and motivate students to apply their intercultural understanding in real-world contexts (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2018). These findings highlight that global competence development is not driven solely by cognitive learning but also depends on

emotional and relational support. Emotional support, therefore, serves as a key mechanism that enables international students to develop the motivation, confidence, and capacity to engage effectively in intercultural and global contexts (Killick & Foster, 2021; OECD, 2018; Teng & Cosier, 2024).

Communication and Interaction Quality

The finding that communication and interaction quality was strongly associated with intercultural interaction and emerged as its strongest predictor is consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of meaningful dialog and sustained student–teacher engagement in intercultural learning. In internationalized higher education contexts, teachers’ communicative openness and responsiveness create important relational conditions that enable students to practice intercultural communication, receive feedback, and develop confidence in expressing themselves in multicultural classrooms (Cancino & Nuñez, 2023). Such interactional opportunities are essential for developing intercultural communicative competence, as they allow students to negotiate meaning, adapt to diverse communicative norms, and reflect on intercultural experiences (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2018). These findings highlight the central role of communication in facilitating intercultural learning and supporting students’ engagement in culturally diverse academic environments. H2b predicted that communication and interaction quality would most strongly predict intercultural interaction. This hypothesis was thus supported.

Furthermore, frequent and meaningful student–teacher interactions help international students overcome linguistic challenges, reduce communication anxiety, and develop adaptive communication strategies. This is particularly relevant in Malaysian higher education, where English is the primary medium of instruction but may not be the first language for many Chinese international students. Teachers who actively encourage dialog and provide supportive feedback can reduce interactional barriers and increase students’ willingness to engage in intercultural communication (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Tran, 2020). In addition, supportive instructional communication strengthens students’ ability to use strategic communication behaviors, such as clarification and pragmatic adjustment, which are essential for effective intercultural interaction (Mokhtar et al., 2025). Overall, communication and interaction quality function as critical relational mechanisms linking student–teacher relationships to intercultural interaction competence, reinforcing the importance of communicative engagement in the development of global competence (Killick & Foster, 2021).

Academic Support

Academic support is important for developing students’ issue analysis competence. The findings indicate that teachers who provide structured guidance, clear explanations, and intellectually stimulating learning tasks significantly contribute to students’ ability to interpret complex global phenomena. In

international higher education contexts, global competence requires more than factual knowledge; it involves the capacity to analyze interconnected political, economic, social, and environmental systems (OECD, 2018). Academic support helps students move beyond surface-level understanding toward deeper analytical engagement with global issues, thereby strengthening their cognitive competence (Amjad et al., 2023; Fantini, 2018). H2c predicted that academic support would most strongly predict issue analysis. This hypothesis was thus supported.

Sociocultural learning theory emphasizes that higher-order thinking develops through guided participation and scaffolding. Teachers act as mediators who structure learning experiences, model analytical reasoning, and encourage critical reflection (Deardorff, 2006; Killick & Foster, 2021). For international students studying in unfamiliar academic systems, such scaffolding becomes even more critical. Differences in pedagogical styles, expectations for classroom participation, and assessment standards may initially create uncertainty. When teachers provide consistent academic support, they help students overcome academic adjustment challenges and engage more effectively with complex academic content (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Singh & Xue, 2025). This process enables students to gradually internalize analytical skills and apply them to global contexts.

Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusiveness

Among the four relationship dimensions examined in this study, cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness consistently demonstrated the strongest and most stable associations with perspective taking and issue analysis. These findings indicate that culturally responsive teaching practices play a foundational role in shaping students' global competence, particularly in internationalized higher education contexts where intercultural learning is embedded in everyday classroom interactions (OECD, 2018). When teachers recognize and value students' cultural identities, incorporate diverse perspectives into classroom discussions, and promote inclusive participation, students are more likely to develop openness, empathy, and intercultural understanding, which are core attitudinal foundations for intercultural competence and global competence development (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022; Deardorff, 2006). Such inclusive environments provide fertile ground for the development of the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral components of global competence by enabling students to engage with differences in supportive and meaningful ways (Chen et al., 2026; Killick & Foster, 2021). H2d predicted that cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness would most strongly predict perspective taking. This hypothesis was thus supported.

In addition, culturally inclusive pedagogy exposes students to multiple cultural frameworks and encourages critical reflection on cultural assumptions. By integrating multicultural examples, facilitating cross-cultural discussions, and challenging ethnocentric perspectives, teachers support students' cognitive flexibility and global mindedness, which are widely recognized as essential

outcomes of internationalized curricula and intercultural learning processes (Cancino & Nuñez, 2023; Leask, 2015). The strong and consistent predictive power of cultural sensitivity across competence domains further suggests that it operates as a foundational condition that enables other relational and instructional factors to function effectively, because students are more likely to participate, take risks, and sustain intercultural engagement when they experience culturally respectful and inclusive learning climates (Markey et al., 2021). In this sense, cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness should be viewed not as an “add-on” to teaching but as a core pedagogical principle for supporting global competence development in culturally diverse higher education settings (Guo et al., 2024; Teng & Cosier, 2024).

Implications

Theoretically, the study enriches models of global competence formation by confirming that interpersonal dynamics within the classroom significantly contribute to students’ intercultural growth. Prior frameworks (Deardorff, 2006; OECD, 2018) largely emphasize cognitive and attitudinal components, but this research highlights relational and affective factors as equally influential. By integrating student–teacher relational quality into the global competence framework, this study bridges the gap between interpersonal theory and intercultural competence development, offering a more holistic understanding of how global competence emerges through social interaction.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that fostering strong, supportive, and culturally responsive relationships between teachers and students can substantially increase Chinese international students’ global competence in Malaysian universities. Faculty development programs should emphasize intercultural communication skills, emotional intelligence, and inclusive teaching practices. Institutions could organize teacher training workshops focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy and relational mentoring to improve both instructional quality and student engagement.

At the policy level, the findings reinforce the importance of embedding intercultural competence development into institutional quality assurance and accreditation frameworks in Malaysia. The Ministry of Higher Education could promote guidelines encouraging universities to integrate student–teacher relationship quality indicators into their international education strategies (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Sidhu et al., 2020).

Limitations

The data were collected at a single time point, restricting causal inference. Reverse causality cannot be ruled out. Future research should employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to capture dynamic developmental processes. The sample was limited to Chinese international students in Kuala Lumpur. The findings may not represent Chinese students in other Malaysian states where

campus diversity differs. Future research should expand geographic coverage across Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of student–teacher relationships on the global competence of Chinese international students in Malaysia. Student–teacher relationships constitute a critical environmental factor in fostering global competence. Cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness were identified as the strongest predictors of perspective taking. Communication and interaction quality exerted the greatest influence on intercultural interaction. Cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness also had the strongest predictive effect on issue analysis, with academic support emerging as the second most influential factor. In contrast, emotional support and care had the most substantial impact on students’ action orientation. These findings demonstrate that the quality of relational and interpersonal experiences within the educational environment shapes global competence. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the central role of teachers as facilitators of intercultural learning and inclusive engagement, particularly in non-Western international higher education contexts. In practice, the findings suggest that universities should promote culturally responsive and student-centered teaching practices, as strengthening student–teacher relationships is an effective strategy for enhancing international students’ global competence.

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