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"Disillusioned Expectations": The Impact of Expectations on University Belonging among Students in Sino-foreign Cooperative Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT: *Students' enrollment expectations significantly shape their sense of belonging to the university. This qualitative study investigates the impact of educational expectations on university belonging among 13 undergraduates at a Sino-foreign cooperative education institution in Shanghai. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Methodological rigor was ensured through systematic coding procedures, member checking, and the use of thick descriptions to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. The findings reveal that students' high expectations centered on institutional prestige, access to global resources, and the continuation of personal strengths. However, these expectations frequently conflict with academic pressure, institutional fragmentation, and limited access to resources. These mismatches can lower students' overall sense of belonging at the university. To address this, institutions should clarify potential academic and social challenges during admissions to manage expectations. Closer collaboration in terms of the curriculum, activities, and faculty–student engagement is also needed to create an inclusive environment, enhancing university belonging and promoting high-quality international education.*

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INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has expanded drastically (Bhat et al., 2025), with countries worldwide adopting diverse ways to collaborate with one another (Hong et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2016). Among these, the establishment of collaborative institutions has become a prominent trend (Tight, 2022). Since China's reform and opening-up, international educational cooperation has deepened continuously (CCG, 2022). Sino-foreign cooperative education combines educational resources and enhances global perspectives through joint institutions and programs (Yang, 2025) and assists the nation in cultivating international talent (Guo & Ye, 2022). Driven by policy support, this model has expanded significantly in scale. During the pandemic, it even accommodated students who were unable to study abroad, effectively mitigating disruptions to their academic plans (Liu, 2022).

Currently, the research interests of scholars in Sino-foreign cooperative education seem to have shifted from institutional narratives on quality management to explorations of the lived experiences of students, scholars, and administrators (Miani & Picucci, 2023). Studies in this area have identified several challenges faced by these students, including academic adaptation difficulties (Yang et al., 2025), identity confusion (Lai & Jung, 2024), and unmet psychological and emotional needs (Hang & Zhang, 2023). Strengthening university belonging emerges as a strategic solution.

University belonging refers to the degree to which students feel accepted and supported (Högberg et al., 2021) and positively influences academic adaptation (Freeman et al., 2007), psychological well-being (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005), and identity formation (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Recent research confirms that belonging is shaped more by interactional processes than by demographic similarities in cross-cultural educational environments (Yang, 2025). There is a lack of qualitative exploration into how students' pre-enrollment expectations influence their subsequent sense of university belonging. Research on students'

development in Sino-foreign cooperative education remains limited and largely quantitative (Porter et al., 2021). Although existing qualitative studies have examined transnational students' academic adaptation (Yang et al., 2025), cultural identity confusion (Lai & Jung, 2024), and psychological needs (Hang & Zhang, 2023), they have not addressed how pre-enrollment expectations shape students' sense of university belonging. While prior research confirms that enrollment expectations are associated with belonging (Dong & Zhou, 2017), there is a clear empirical gap in qualitative studies examining how such expectations are interpreted and disconfirmed in Sino-foreign cooperative education contexts. To address this gap, this study employs expectation–disconfirmation theory (EDT) as an analytical lens to examine interview data from 13 undergraduates, offering a theoretically grounded qualitative account of the mechanisms linking expectations and university belonging.

As a significant predictor of belonging, future expectations influence students' academic and social development (Atabey et al., 2020; Dubow, 2001; Israelashvili, 1997). This study examines a Sino-foreign cooperative education institution in one of the largest comprehensive universities in Shanghai. Operating for nearly two decades, the program serves as a case to explore how undergraduates' educational expectations influence their university belonging through qualitative research. It aims to answer the following question: How do students' educational expectations affect their degree of university belonging in Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sino-foreign Cooperative Education

Sino-foreign cooperative education consists of two models, "institutions" and "programs." Cooperative education institutions are found as independent legal entities, along with cooperative education programs that do not possess independent legal person status; both refer to Sino-foreign collaborations in areas including curricula, disciplines, and academic studies (Ma, 2020). A "Sino-foreign cooperative education institution" is defined as "an educational institution established within China through cooperation between a foreign and a Chinese educational institution, primarily enrolling Chinese citizens" (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2003). Such institutions account for the majority of all Sino-foreign cooperative education types, with more than 2 million graduates (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023), with examples such as Shanghai New York University.

Current challenges

Institutional-level challenges are reflected primarily in macro development and institutional construction: While Sino-foreign cooperative education continues to grow, it also faces challenges such as regional development disparities, imbalanced academic levels, and issues with legal person governance

structures (Dong & Ni, 2020; Zhan & Zheng, 2022). These studies effectively summarize macrolevel problems but lack empirical analysis to clarify the priority of these challenges. Other issues include insignificant achievements in faculty construction (Guo & Liu, 2021) and prominent contradictions between school scale and quality (Guo & Liu, 2021; Liu & Wang, 2021). Research in this area fails to distinguish between "institutions" and "programs". Additionally, there are unsound institutional systems such as teacher evaluation and assessment mechanisms (Tan, 2009; Shi & Wu, 2012), and these systems are outdated because of subsequent policy revisions.

Students' development-level challenges focus on individual adaptation and growth dilemmas: Due to differences in educational concepts and cultural backgrounds, Sino-foreign cooperative education faces a series of problems in the implementation process, which not only affect teaching quality but also have a negative effect on student development (Lee et al., 2014). Lee et al.'s findings are based on broad surveys and lack in-depth exploration of individual student experiences. However, few empirical studies have focused on student development (Shen, 2020), which highlights the research gap in this field.

Studies on student development have explored three types of challenges faced by students in Sino-foreign cooperative education: academic adaptation, identity and social identification, and emotional and mental health needs. Many students demonstrate low academic engagement, with significant levels of study weariness (Zhu & Zhao, 2022), although their sample is limited to eastern Chinese institutions and lacks regional representativeness. With respect to cultural identity, some learners in Sino-foreign cooperative institutions face conflicting allegiances, often valuing foreign cultures while devaluing their local ones (Zhang, 2017). This tension can create confusion in their personal cultural identity and highlight the differences between Chinese and Western value systems (Strayhorn, 2012), but neither study clarifies whether this variation exists across different program types. Psychologically, these students' mental health needs remain inadequately addressed (Lee et al., 2014). Compounding this, economic pressures from high tuition costs and living expenses create psychological vulnerability. The framework addressing the disparity between substantial financial investment and employment outcomes (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005), originating from foreign higher education contexts, requires contextual adaptation. This disparity manifests as diminished resilience, poor adaptability, and heightened anxiety (Ma et al., 2018).

University Belonging

Strayhorn defines university belonging as the degree to which students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported within their institution (2012). Belonging manifests in various contexts, such as the school or classroom (Nuñez, 2009), and positively affects students' mental health (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Nuñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012), academic performance (Freeman et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012), and identity construction (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Xie, 2011). Although students in Chinese universities generally report high levels of

university belonging, more than a quarter still lack this sense (Ha et al., 2019). Critically, the study by Ha et al. (2019) excludes cooperative education students, which limits its applicability to the current research context.

Current challenges

Academic performance, social engagement, environmental factors, and personal background significantly influence university belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020). In terms of the campus environment, satisfaction with the physical setting (Cemalcilar, 2010), a collaborative atmosphere (Ruedas-Gracia et al., 2023), institutional fairness (Ha et al., 2019), and university prestige (Bao & Xu, 2006) are positively correlated with university belonging. Conversely, a low degree of alignment between university norms and students' self-esteem weakens university belonging (Menkor et al., 2021), while virtual network environments can enhance it (Ha et al., 2019). With respect to personal characteristics, female students, those from low-income backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and first-generation college students generally exhibit lower levels of university belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Ruedas-Gracia et al., 2023). University belonging tends to increase with enrollment duration, but it declines among students from lower socioeconomic statuses or those born abroad (Ha et al., 2019; Högberg et al., 2021).

Research on students in Sino-foreign cooperative education remains limited. Existing findings indicate variations in their sense of university belonging to cooperative institutions: students in "2+2" programs show weaker university belonging than those studying entirely in China do (Xie, 2011), while master's students in cooperative programs exhibit lower university belonging to Chinese institutions, influenced by factors such as study duration, undergraduate background, and training disparities (Dong & Zhou, 2017). Both studies use quantitative methods that overlook subjective student experiences. They also fail to explore pre-enrollment factors, and this constitutes a key research gap that the present study intends to address.

Pre-enrollment expectations

The present is a product of what we largely wish to become in the future (Verdugo & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2022). Future expectations are people's expectations of an event, which influence their planning, behavior, and development (Sánchez-Sandoval & Verdugo, 2016). For adolescents, future expectations include plans such as completing academic studies, achieving career success, and establishing intimate relationships (Simsek, 2012, p. 93). Future expectations predict students' sense of school belonging (Israelashvili, 1997; Atabey et al., 2020). For students in Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions, pre-enrollment expectations for the future constitute an important influencing factor on their degree of university belonging (Dong & Zhou, 2017).

Existing research on Sino-foreign cooperative education has predominantly centered on institutional challenges (Dong & Ni, 2020; Ying & Wenjing, 2023). While a subset of studies has documented cultural adjustment difficulties among

students transitioning into higher education (Hang & Zhang, 2022), particularly highlighting adaptive struggles during their initial academic phase (Yang et al., 2025), emerging evidence suggests that pre-enrollment perceptions and expectations regarding cooperative programs already shape students' university belonging (Dong & Zhou, 2017). However, the specific mechanisms through which expectations influence university belonging remain underexplored. This gap is notable considering the unique context in which cooperative education students form their pre-enrollment expectations (Xie, 2011). This is also notable given the well-documented struggles with university belonging among transnational students (Ma et al., 2018), and these struggles have not been linked to pre-enrollment factors.

By investigating the relationship between pre-enrollment expectations and university belonging through student narratives, this study addresses key oversights in both the cooperative education literature and the university belonging literature. This approach strengthens the justification for the study's focus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, expectation–disconfirmation theory (EDT) is adopted as its core theoretical framework, with the goal of analyzing the dynamic relationship between educational expectations and university belonging among students in Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions (Oliver, 1980). EDT provides a systematic analytical logic for explaining how the gap between preconceived expectations and reality shapes individuals' psychological perceptions.

The selection of EDT is theoretically motivated by the study's focus on the dynamic interaction between pre-enrollment expectations and post-enrollment experiences in shaping university belonging. While expectancy–value theory (EVT) focuses on how success expectations and task value drive motivation and behavioral choices (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020), it is less suited for examining how expectations are subsequently confirmed or violated through lived institutional experiences. Similarly, self-efficacy theory (SET) emphasizes beliefs about personal capability and goal attainment (Bandura, 1997) but does not theorize about the expectation–experience gap or its implications for institutional belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). In contrast, EDT explicitly conceptualizes outcomes as a function of expectation–experience alignment or disconfirmation, making it particularly appropriate for Sino-foreign cooperative education contexts, where students often enter distinctive and highly structured pre-enrollment expectations. EDT therefore offers a more precise analytical framework for explaining how expectation–experience consistency or mismatch shapes students' evolving sense of belonging over time, an explanatory process not adequately captured by alternative expectation-related theories.

EDT was first proposed by Oliver (1980) to explain consumer satisfaction and has since been gradually extended to the field of education. El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022) confirmed the theory's explanatory power for educational experiences. The core proposition of EDT is that an individual's evaluation of an

outcome, such as satisfaction with a program or identification with an institution, is shaped by the gap between pre-enrollment expectations and actual experiences. Given the need to adapt EDT to the context of this study, the research first clarified the internal connections between its core concepts to lay the foundation for subsequent qualitative exploration. First, pre-enrollment educational expectations refer to the preliminary anticipations formed by students regarding their learning experiences, institutional resources, and personal development opportunities before they enter cooperative education programs. These expectations are shaped by institutional promotion, social discourse, and personal aspirations. As noted in the literature review, the uniqueness of Sino-foreign cooperative education means that such expectations of students usually revolve around core directions related to program attributes, such as the perceived value derived from institutional affiliation and the accessibility of international resources (Xie, 2011; Dong & Zhou, 2017). These preliminary expectations serve as implicit benchmarks for students to evaluate their actual campus experiences later, but their specific connotations need to be further explored in combination with students' actual individual experiences.

Second, expectation disconfirmation, the core mechanism of EDT, refers to the degree of alignment or deviation between pre-enrollment expectations and actual experiences (Oliver, 1980). It can be categorized into two types: positive, where reality exceeds expectations; and negative, where reality falls short of expectations. Existing research has shown that the gap between expectations and reality is a key factor leading to reduced university belonging among transnational education students (Israelashvili, 1997; Ma et al., 2018). This provides a reference for exploring the relationship between expectation disconfirmation and university belonging in the context of this study: expectation disconfirmation in different directions and degrees may have differential effects on students' university belonging, but the specific impact paths need to be further verified through interview data.

Third, reality shock is a special form of negative disconfirmation in EDT. It refers to situations where idealized pre-enrollment expectations collide sharply with reality that are unmet or even significantly inconsistent (Oliver, 1980). Unlike minor expectation gaps, reality shock often triggers a strong sense of disillusionment and may directly weaken the psychological connection between individuals and relevant objects. For students in Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions, a real-world shock may occur if their expectations for the aforementioned core directions are not fulfilled through actual experience. Whether such a shock further affects their degree of university belonging and how it does so are core questions that this study needs to explore in depth through qualitative data.

The core value of EDT for this study lies in its ability to connect the two key constructs of "expectations" and "university belonging," filling a critical gap in the literature: the lack of qualitative exploration into how expectations influence university belonging in the context of Sino-foreign cooperative education. On the basis of EDT, this study builds an analytical logic of "expectations-experiences-disconfirmation-university belonging." Students first form preliminary pre-

enrollment expectations for cooperative education programs; after entering the institution, they develop specific perceptions of reality through daily campus experiences; subsequently, they compare real experiences with initial expectations, resulting in positive or negative expectation disconfirmation, and significant gaps trigger reality shock; finally, this disconfirmation process affects their subjective evaluation of the institution, thereby shaping or changing their university belonging.

To enhance analytical transparency, this theoretical framework explicitly maps the operationalization of its core components for subsequent analysis. Specifically, "expectation" refers to the pre-enrollment cognitive anticipations formed by students regarding academic experiences, institutional resources, and personal development opportunities in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs, shaped by institutional promotion, social discourse, and personal aspirations. "Disconfirmation" denotes the subjective evaluation gap between students' actual campus experiences and pre-enrollment expectations and is categorized into positive disconfirmation, where reality exceeds expectations; negative disconfirmation, where reality falls short of expectations; and non-disconfirmation, where reality matches expectations. "Belonging" is operationalized on the basis of Strayhorn's 2012 definition, focusing on the degree to which students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported by the cooperative institution, with specific reference to their perceptions in cross-cultural academic and social contexts. Through this clarified theoretical framework, this study can not only systematically identify the potential paths connecting expectations and university belonging but also provide a theoretical perspective for understanding the psychological experiences of students in Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions, thereby filling a critical gap in research in this field.

METHOD

This qualitative case study explores 13 Chinese students from a Sino-foreign cooperative education institution, the S Institute, to examine how students' educational expectations affect their sense of belonging in such institutions.

The S Institute, established through cooperation between a Chinese and an American university (the latter hereafter referred to as M University) for more than a decade, allows students to independently choose domestic and foreign learning models, making it a typical case. Its curriculum and training models mostly adopt the standards of the American partner university, and selecting this case is important for the realization of training objectives in other similar institutions.

Participants were recruited through a campus research flyer, and all participation was voluntary. Each student received 80 RMB as a token of appreciation upon completing the interview. After two weeks of recruitment, 39 students participated in the interviews. Using maximum variation sampling across majors, genders, belonging levels, and grades (Chen, 2000), the researchers selected 13 respondents until data saturation was reached (Table 1). Saturation

was assessed through iterative thematic analysis when no novel themes emerged across three consecutive interviews and when existing themes achieved conceptual depth and contextual variation, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic saturation in reflexive thematic analysis. The online interviews, which lasted 40–80 minutes each, produced a total of 13 hours of audio, which was transcribed into approximately 200,000 Chinese character manuscripts.

The researchers used thematic analysis to analyze the data. It is important to classify data according to codes or labels and then analyze the coded data blocks, which helps explain the potential complexity of social phenomena (Glesne, 2016). To ensure the authenticity and reliability of the data, a thick, rich description was used in the research process to record the entire interview in detail, including the respondents' expressions, behaviors, and other details (Dong, 2019). At the same time, member checking was carried out to share the interview transcripts, analytical process, and conclusions with the respondents and further optimize the research results according to their feedback (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Approval No.: LL2023000142). The researchers also obtained research permission from the relevant departments of the S Institute to ensure that the research process was legal and compliant, that the rights and interests of participants were fully protected and that their personal information was strictly safeguarded. With respect to the authors' positionality, both authors possess cross-cultural educational backgrounds in both Chinese and foreign contexts, providing insider and emic perspectives that enrich the analytical depth of this research.

Table 1: Interview Participant Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Grade Level	Study Plan
Ren	Male	Senior	Stay at S Institute throughout the program
Coffee	Male	Junior	Stay at S Institute throughout the program
Steven	Male	Senior	2 years at S Institute + 2 years at M University
XXX	Female	Sophomore	Plan to study at M University for 2 years
D	Female	Sophomore	Plan to study at M University for 2 years
X	Male	Freshman	Plan to study at M University for 2 years
Heimao	Female	Freshman	Plan to join other exchange student programs
H	Female	Freshman	Plan to pursue a combined bachelor's and master's program
W	Male	Freshman	Plan to study at M University for 2 years
Rui	Male	Sophomore	Plan to study at M University for 2 years
Huu	Female	Junior	Stay at S Institute throughout the program
Htuan	Male	Junior	Stay at S Institute throughout the program
SL	Male	Sophomore	Plan to join other exchange student programs

FINDINGS

Negative Disconfirmation of Institutional Prestige Expectations: How the "Prestigious School Halo" Fades and Weakens University Belonging

Studies have shown that university belonging increases with duration (Ha et al., 2019). However, this study revealed that most interviewees reported a decline in their sense of belonging to the program over time. The majority of students chose this program based on their pre-enrollment expectations of the host institution's reputation, including access to its academic resources, career development support, and professional growth opportunities. The feeling of isolation was caused primarily by differences in university calendars, course selection structures, semester structures, and institutional factors.

Owing to the separation between the college and the university in terms of administration, teaching resources, and culture, students cannot access the local institution's resources as they expected. The first issue concerns the differences in university calendars between the two institutions. Since the S Institute follows the schedule of its U.S. partner institution, it does not align with the schedule of the host Chinese university. As a result, students often face difficulties when they are trying to collaborate, participate in social events, or select courses, which in turn affects their sense of belonging at the university. As Ren mentioned, *"My club has unified activities during the summer vacation, and I have to attend classes throughout July, trying to fit it all in by myself is truly stressing me out."* And XXX shared, *"During certain periods, when S University was not in an exam week, our institute was, and vice versa. Although it's not an enormous deal, this misalignment created a sense of disconnection, as it felt rather unusual not to share the same academic schedule as my other friends."*

The unique course selection system also contributes to this university's sense of belonging. Courses between M College and other faculties are not interoperable, and credit transfer is difficult. Given the different academic systems and high degree of study pressure at the S Institute, most students do not choose courses outside the S Institute. As D mentioned, *"All our courses are offered within the S Institute; we don't have many opportunities to take courses from the main University... Although there are very few options, the credits don't transfer."*

With respect to classes at the S Institute, students have limited classroom interaction with peers from other faculties from the main host campus. Reduced shared topics on academics and daily life may lead to fewer interactions, limiting opportunities to build broader friendships. This hinders the formation of a campus community identity and weakens students' degree of university belonging. *"I feel disconnected from other students on [the host] campus. For example, they talk about courses like advanced mathematics, general chemistry, university physics, etc., but I've never gotten to choose those."* (X) The independent course selection system also restricts students in this program, as they cannot take electives from M University, which has a negative impact on their sense of university belonging. *"Most courses are not interoperable with S Institute... It's a pity that we can't easily attend lectures by renowned professors."* (XXX)

The calendar misalignment exemplifies a critical process disconfirmation within the EDT framework. Students entered with expectations of seamless academic rhythm aligned with global partner institutions but encountered institutional fragmentation that disrupted their temporal belonging. This structural disconnect did not merely cause logistical inconvenience but fundamentally eroded their perception of being valued members of a unified academic community. This case demonstrates how process disconfirmation operates as a distinct mechanism from outcome disconfirmation in EDT, attacking the very foundation of belonging by signaling to students that their temporal experiences do not align with the institutional ideal.

Reality Shock in International Resource Access: Negative Disconfirmation between Expected High-Quality Global Resources and Practical Barriers

Studies have shown that university belonging increases with duration (Ha et al., 2019). However, this study revealed that most interviewees reported a decline in their sense of belonging to the program over time. The majority of students chose this program on the basis of their pre-enrollment expectations of high-quality international resources, which is consistent with the 'international resource accessibility' expectation dimension outlined in the theoretical framework. When these idealized expectations collide sharply with actual experiences, it triggers a reality shock (Oliver, 1980), which in turn affects their degree of university belonging. Prior to enrollment, their perceptions of the S Institute remained rooted in pure imagination, leading to discrepancies between expectations and reality upon entry, thereby exerting negative effects on their university belonging. *"Because we couldn't truly experience the joint institute beforehand, our perceptions of this place were mainly based on rather superficial impressions. In addition, that [the reality] for sure was not what I expected."* (Coffee)

Most students expect to gain international resources and diverse perspectives through their Sino-foreign educational experience. However, high thresholds for accessing these resources exclude many students, and foreign exchange programs are a key example of this. This in turn weakens their degree of university belonging. For instance, some students cannot study abroad because of academic performance issues or financial constraints; thus, their original expectations of obtaining a foreign degree end up unfulfilled.

> *"I recall a Korean humanities professor from my freshman year who said, 'S Institute is strange because the better you are, the faster you leave.' What he meant was students in the dual-degree program who perform the best, would transfer to the US after two years. Those who are slightly less competitive may stay for three years to pursue a combined bachelor's and master's degree."* (Steven)

Additionally, students pay high tuition fees and expect high-quality international teaching experience, but the reality falls short. Most of the interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the current teaching quality. *"I thought we should be like, 'you get what you pay for', but I don't think the quality*

matched the extra tuition that I paid for." (Coffee) The input–output imbalance leads students to question the teaching standards. *"I thought the classes would be like the movies, with many interactions in class, but I still have some professors here [S Institute] delivering lectures from the stage."* (D). When asked follow-up questions about the source of their perspectives, many students said they heard from other friends or family or simply gathered information from social media platforms. Therefore, this mismatch between students' expectations for teaching styles increases the dissatisfaction of overall experience and university belonging. With respect to English-taught institutes, many participants highlighted the expectation of English proficiency for their faculty members. Instructors from non-English-speaking countries (e.g., China, France, Russia) may speak with accented English or make grammatical errors, causing comprehension difficulties and student resistance. *"Among fully English-taught courses, only a few instructors are from English-speaking countries. This makes the understanding of the materials and communication with faculty rather hard."* (Htuan)

Overall, there is a gap between the expectations and real-life experiences of students in Sino-foreign cooperative education in terms of international resources, which affects their overall degree of university belonging. The threshold for foreign exchange programs is high because of factors such as academic performance and financial constraints, making it difficult for students to achieve their expectations of studying abroad for degrees. High tuition fees fail to match high-quality teaching. Some teachers have problems such as insufficient teaching levels and language expression barriers in fully English-taught courses. The courses focus on theory, neglect practice, and are out of touch with industry needs. These factors mean that students' pre-enrollment expectations for high-quality international resources fail to be fulfilled, resulting in negative disconfirmation, which acts as a key barrier to enhancing university belonging.

Disconfirmed Expectation of Personal Advantage: Misalignment between Pre-enrollment Aspirations and New Environmental Realities

Students' pre-enrollment expectations of continuing their personal advantages, formed on the basis of past academic achievements and strengths, face challenges in the new environment. Students admitted to the Chinese host university are all outstanding performers in the national college entrance examination. When these high achievers become classmates, some lose their previous dominant status. This creates a gap between their pre-enrollment expectations of continuing personal advantages and actual experiences. This gap triggers a sense of 'disillusionment' and further leads to a decline in university belonging.

> *"Why do I think the sense of belonging gradually declines? I think a major reason is that most undergraduate students at the S Institute entered through the college entrance examination. Those with the highest scores are considered the best. Everyone thought they were good and entered a decent university, only to find themselves struggling to understand this or that in the course. Moreover, university competition*

is fierce. You may no longer be the top student in your class... Therefore, this displacement for sure makes me wonder whether or not I belong to this place." (Steven)

Additionally, students who enter the S Institute with top national exam scores often hold high expectations for their future development, particularly in terms of employment opportunities. Obtaining a degree from the S Institute is not only the result of personal efforts but also a qualification certificate with significant social recognition. For many students, a degree from the S Institute means having more advantages and opportunities in their future careers. However, they only realized that the title and influence of the degree can only go thus far and that true skills can help them achieve a dream job. This leads to psychological imbalance, which has a negative effect on their degree of university belonging. *"(When first admitted), we fantasized that entering S Institute, we thought this would automatically lead to 'success,' but only to learn that we still have to put so much more effort into the work and that still doesn't guarantee a sure future. I guess that the longer we stay here, the more reality hits. Now I can fully understand this, and so do my classmates..."* (Rui)

Beyond institutional structures, expectation disconfirmation triggered profound identity negotiations among students. When reality diverged from their pre-enrollment visions, participants did not simply report disappointment but actively reconstructed their cultural selves within competing value systems. Chinese educational scripts emphasizing academic excellence clashed with Western scripts prioritizing holistic development, placing students in what sociologists term a liminal space between cultural identities. Their agency manifested not as passive acceptance but as strategic identity work, negotiating between being high achievers in the Chinese context and being well-rounded individuals in the international context. This identity labor revealed how belonging is not merely an emotional attachment to place but a continuous process of self-narration within institutional discourses. EDT gains explanatory depth when recognizing that disconfirmation operates not only at the institutional experience level but also simultaneously at the identity constitution level, where students must reconcile their aspirational selves with their actual institutional realities. This dual-level analysis illuminates why surface-level satisfaction metrics fail to capture the profound belonging challenges in transnational educational spaces.

DISCUSSION

This study advances EDT by reconceptualizing university belonging as a temporal-spatial process shaped by institutional structures rather than merely an emotional outcome. The analysis reveals how expectation gaps in Sino-foreign cooperative education erode belonging through institutional rhythms and calendar misalignments that create invisible boundaries, demonstrating that institutional design itself generates belonging challenges independent of individual student

characteristics. This structural reframing significantly advances transnational education research beyond traditional cultural adaptation frameworks.

Through qualitative interviews, this study reveals the dynamic relationship between expectations and university belonging among Sino-foreign cooperative education students. Gaps between students' expectations of elite university resources, international experiences, and personal advantage continuity versus real-world experiences are core drivers of declining university belonging. However, some of the results were not unique to this population.

At the level of elite university resources, the fragmentation of administrative and teaching systems between two universities has made it difficult for students to integrate into the main host university's resource network, which is consistent with previous findings that the cooperation intensity of Sino-foreign institutions affects students' university belonging (Xie, 2011). This institutional fragmentation not only restricts students' access to elite academic resources but also exacerbates the "marginalized" experience through temporal–spatial mismatches, echoing Ha et al.'s (2019) discovery that environmental and student interactions influence university belonging. Therefore, it is recommended that programs align more closely with the host university's schedule so that students do not feel out of place with their time and course options. Many of the available elective courses outside of their institute are offered in the host university's primary language. Thus, students should be informed in advance about what to expect, and those who truly wish to take such courses to enrich their knowledge can prepare accordingly.

In the dimension of international resources, students' expectations for high-quality teaching and exchange opportunities are constrained by the academic and financial thresholds of exchange programs, as well as the "input–output imbalance" between high tuition fees and low teaching quality. This reflects consumerist tendencies in higher education, where students view themselves as consumers of educational products, treating education as an investment or consumption behavior and expecting it to bring good jobs and income. However, when efforts fail to yield expected returns, individuals begin to question the institution's purpose. Rather than relying solely on word-of-mouth, universities can offer students a more realistic picture of what to expect in their daily academic life. For example, senior students could be invited to share their experiences with incoming cohorts. With respect to language and accents, the focus should remain on knowledge acquisition, regardless of nationality or linguistic background. If accents or language differences present challenges, joint institutions can provide targeted support through mentors, writing centers, or workshops, using both online and offline formats. This approach not only helps students form realistic expectations of faculty members but also draws on the experiences of previous students to improve teaching and classroom facilitation. While faculty members naturally maintain their own teaching styles, providing recommendations and support structures can ease students' transitions and enhance learning outcomes. This aligns with recent research on transnational students in diverse contexts, which emphasizes the need for comprehensive psychological, social, and

academic support systems to improve student experiences in cross-cultural educational environments (Rabiei-Kashanaki et al., 2025).

Structural and governance factors provide alternative explanations for our findings. Power asymmetries between partner universities often determine resource allocation patterns regardless of student expectations. Bureaucratic inertia and regulatory requirements further constrain institutional integration possibilities. These structural realities interact with expectation disconfirmation, as students interpret institutional fragmentation through their pre-enrollment expectation frameworks. Recognizing this interaction strengthens our theoretical contribution by demonstrating how individual psychological processes and institutional structures jointly shape belonging experiences in transnational educational spaces.

With respect to personal advantage continuity, the erosion of elite Gaokao students' competitive edge in peer competition, coupled with gaps between employment expectations and reality, reflects a mismatch between institutional design and student expectations. Given the role of higher education in career selection and symbolic significance, individuals invest in higher education not only for knowledge but also to enhance their social status (Wang, 2009). Integrating humanistic attributes into educational inputs, such as teachers' and students' ideals, beliefs, and positive growth, may balance educational expectations and enhance university belonging. When students and parents expand their educational expectations from securing good jobs or further studies to gaining broader vision and real capabilities, their sense of belonging is less likely to be constrained by academic pressure, and they are more willing to seek diverse development opportunities on campus (Zhang et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Taking the S Institute as a case study, this study revealed the dynamic relationship between the educational expectations and university belonging of students in Sino-foreign cooperative education. Students' high expectations of prestige, international resources, and personal advantages often clash with the realities of their experiences.

The results of this study suggest that Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions should communicate potential challenges such as academic pressure, differences in school systems, and teaching styles, as well as other relevant aspects, to incoming students to foster realistic expectations. It also calls for stronger collaboration across partnered institutions in terms of courses, activities, and exchanges to create a more inclusive cross-cultural environment that enhances students' university belonging and adaptability.

The results of this study provide not only practical paths for improving the university belonging of students in Sino-foreign cooperative education but also a new perspective for research on cross-cultural adaptation in the internationalization of higher education. Future research should employ

longitudinal designs to track how expectation-belonging dynamics evolve throughout students' academic journeys. Comparative studies across different Sino-foreign institutions with varying governance models would help identify which structural arrangements best support belonging. Mixed-methods approaches combining surveys with in-depth interviews could validate and quantify the relationships identified in this qualitative study.

This study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The single-site case design limits generalizability across different institutional contexts and partnership models. The relatively small sample size and cross-sectional nature of the data prevent the analysis of the evolution of expectations over time. Self-selection bias may exist, as students with stronger opinions about belonging might have been more likely to participate. Additionally, the absence of administrative perspectives in our data collection provides an incomplete picture of institutional challenges. Notwithstanding these limitations, our findings offer valuable insights into expectation disconfirmation processes that merit further investigation across diverse transnational education settings.

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