

**Teacher expectations in a university setting: The perspectives of teachers**

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## **Author Biography**

Dr. Zheng Li is a lecturer in College of International Studies, Southwest University, China. Her research interests are teacher expectations and beliefs with a focus on teacher expectation effects in tertiary education. Her work is mostly centred on individual differences that play a role in expectancy effects. She has published articles in academic journals and attended and given presentations at international academic conferences.

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## **Abstract**

This study was designed to investigate the bases of teacher expectations in higher education. The first author interviewed 20 university teachers from an English-as-a-foreign-language course, exploring their expectations for the first-year undergraduates in their classes. The grounded theory method was adopted to analyse the data that had been collected. The results showed that for this sample of 20 teachers, student characteristics were important contributing factors to their expectations in the teachers' university settings. The factors the teachers considered important included students' 1) prior academic achievement, 2) motivation, 3) study skills, and 4) academic discipline. Also, teacher characteristics were found to be another major source of these university teachers' expectations, including teachers' 1) past teaching and learning experience and 2) teaching self-efficacy. The findings suggested that the bases of teacher expectations in higher education may differ from those at the elementary or secondary school level.

**Keywords:** teacher expectations, teacher self-efficacy, undergraduate, higher education

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**Teacher expectations in a university setting: The perspectives of teachers**

One of the most important concerns in higher education is to enhance undergraduates' academic attainment. Previous research in the field of educational psychology has produced fruitful findings with regard to factors that relate to academic success and failure (Winne & Nesbit, 2010). Lately, it has also been found that teacher expectations—inferences that teachers make about future academic achievement and general behaviour of students—predict student future academic achievement in tertiary institutions (Li & Rubie-Davies, 2017). This finding suggests that undergraduate student learning could be promoted by encouraging positive teacher expectation effects. The self-fulfilling mechanisms of teacher expectations consist of three basic stages: teachers develop particular expectations for students, and then, followed by teachers' differential behaviours as a consequence of high expectations for some students and low for others, teachers' initial expectations become confirmed through student reactions and outcomes (Jussim, Smith, Madon, & Palumbo, 1998). The problem is that teachers' expectations and the expectation effects differ greatly—from student to student and from teacher to teacher—in regular classrooms (e.g., Jussim et al., 1998; Timmermans, Kuyper, & van der Werf, 2015) and although some effects for individual students which result from teacher

expectations are positive (Galatea effects), other teacher expectation effects are negative (Golem effects; Babad, 2009). Similarly, some teachers appear more likely to generate positive effects among their students, overall, whereas others seem have more negative effects for all their students (Rubie-Davies, 2015; Weinstein, 2002).

The formation of teachers' initial expectations has long attracted research interest and many fruitful investigations have been completed (e.g., Dusek & Joseph, 1983; Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012). However, few studies have investigated how university teacher expectations are formed. The formation of teacher expectations in higher education may differ from those at the lower school levels. It may be, for example, given the often large lecture setting of tertiary classrooms that teachers are more likely to form expectations at a class, rather than an individual level (Li & Rubie-Davies, 2017). Also in large class settings, student characteristics may be less salient in tertiary settings than they are in primary or secondary settings, because individualised interactions with teachers are more restricted. Therefore, it might be that there are other potential factors that could relate to teachers' expectations in tertiary settings but the focus on student characteristics has meant that other potential influencers of teacher expectations, for instance, teachers' beliefs, have been ignored. Investigating the bases of teacher expectations in higher education may shed light on factors other than individual

student characteristics that could contribute to teachers' expectations because to date the key focus of research has been on student characteristics that influence teacher expectations (e.g., Gut, Reimann, & Grob, 2013). Further, university teachers are working with groups of students who have been selected based on high achievement measured by standardised tests or grades (Steenman, Bakker, & van Tartwijk, 2016). As a result, students are likely to be more homogeneous in terms of social background and prior achievement than the students engaged in the compulsory education sector (Smith, 2012). This difference could also mean that university teachers' expectations have different bases than those of teachers in other education settings. Hence, the potential self-reported sources of university teachers' expectations were the focus of the present study.

The current study was designed to explore what particular factors may shape university teachers' expectations. Given this open-ended investigation, a qualitative methodology was adopted to explore in-depth the views of 20 university teachers in relation to what they considered the bases for their class-level expectations. The findings may provide some initial ideas in relation to enhancing student achievement in higher education, such that positive expectation effects could be encouraged and negative ones avoided within tertiary institutions.

## **Teacher expectations related to student characteristics in a primary and secondary school setting**

A large body of research has indicated that teacher expectations are likely to vary with individual differences in students. For example, teachers have been found to hold higher expectations for students who are of European and Asian origin than for ethnic minority group students, such as African American and Latino students (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007), Black Caribbean students (Strand, 2012), Māori students in New Zealand (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006), and so on. The socioeconomic status (SES) of students' families also seems to correlate with teacher expectations. The academic world has commonly contended that teachers hold higher expectations for students from higher SES backgrounds, but lower expectations for students from poorer families (Gregory & Huang, 2013), from a migration background (Gut, Reimann, & Grob, 2013), or with less-educated parents (Timmermans et al., 2015). Also, student gender may play a role in shaping teacher expectations. Expectations for female students have been shown to be higher for reading achievement (Hinnant, O'Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009), arts, literature (Catsambis, Mulkey, Buttaro Jr, Steelman, & Koch, 2012), and high-stakes tests (Timmermans et al., 2015), whereas male students appear to be expected to achieve

more highly in academic subjects like science and mathematics (Spelke, 2005), and physical education (Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Trouilloud, & Jussim, 2009). In addition, there are other student characteristics which have been presumed to contribute to teacher expectations, for example, disabilities (Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, van den Bergh, & Voeten, 2010), track placement (Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012), and student work habits (Timmermans, de Boer, & van der Werf, 2016).

However, by far, the strongest influence on teacher expectations has been found to be students' past performance in previous examinations and standardised tests (Hinnant et al., 2009). In a recent study, researchers investigated 500 teachers and 7550 students in the final year of primary education in the Netherlands (Timmermans et al., 2015). Teachers' expectations were measured by recommendations for each student into a track in secondary education. The analyses showed that students' prior achievement, that is, their scores in achievement tests in language, mathematics, and reading comprehension, explained 80% of the variance in teacher expectations at the individual student level.

### **Teacher expectations related to teacher characteristics in a primary and secondary school context**

Lately, research has shifted to teacher-related expectations. It has been

reported that 21.8% of the variance in teacher expectations can be explained at the teacher level, with student performance controlled for (Timmermans et al., 2015). However, compared with studies regarding teacher expectations related to student characteristics, there is a paucity of research exploring teacher characteristics as sources of expectations.

A couple of studies have related teachers' expectations to certain demographic features, but have reported contrasting results. For example, one study reported that teachers' gender was not correlated with their expectations for student reading achievement (Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012). However, recent findings have revealed that male teachers held lower expectations for student mathematics achievement than female teachers did (Watson et al., 2016). Another study indicated that teachers' expectations tended to be positively related to their teaching experience (Rubie-Davies, 2006), but the same researcher later reported no relationship between teachers' teaching experience and expectations in a larger study (Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012).

Researchers have also explored the relations between teacher beliefs and expectations and one major focus has been the role that teacher self-efficacy plays in the development of teacher expectations. However, although an association between teacher expectations and teacher efficacy has been assumed (Tschannen-Moran &

Hoy, 2001), very little work has been done to empirically measure the relations between teachers' self-efficacy and expectations, and the results of those studies that have been conducted seem to be equivocal in their findings. For example, Archambault, Janosz, and Chouinard (2012) found that the correlation between teachers' expectations and self-efficacy was moderate in secondary schools. However, in a New Zealand study (Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012), a statistically significant correlation between teacher self-efficacy and expectations was not found in elementary schools.

Teachers' pedagogical beliefs have also been assumed to play a part in expectations as well. For example, teachers who hold beliefs that students are born with a certain amount of intelligence (a fixed view), are likely to have lower expectations for their students (Dusek, Hall, & Meyer, 1985); in contrast, teachers with beliefs that intelligence can be grown tend to have higher expectations for students (Jordan & Stanovich, 2001). Hence, there has been an increasing empirical base showing that teacher expectations may be a function of teacher characteristics and beliefs, but consensus has not been reached for many factors. More evidence is needed to depict what and how teacher characteristics and beliefs could shape teacher expectations.

## **Teacher expectations in tertiary settings**

Although a paucity of research about teacher expectations has been located in tertiary settings, studies have suggested that some commonly acknowledged factors seem to function differently for teacher expectations in higher education than they do at lower school levels. A notable difference is that the demographic factors such as student age, gender, SES, and ethnic group which have been widely reported to moderate teacher expectations in elementary and secondary schools have been rarely documented to be related to teacher expectations in higher education (Wijnia, Loyens, Derous, & Schmidt, 2016). That may be because university students tend to be more homogeneous. That is, only a very small percentage of students from ethnic minority groups or poor socioeconomic backgrounds are admitted to university (Smith, 2012). Furthermore, university teachers may perceive some student characteristics which are university specific, such as which academic discipline the students major in, whether the students are supported by scholarships, whether the students are mature, and so on. It may be factors such as these that influence teachers' expectations at university. However, to date there has been no research on whether any of the aforementioned factors may be related to university teachers' expectations. Clearly, higher education has a different population of students from

those in elementary and secondary schools, so it is plausible that findings from lower levels of schooling may not apply to university teachers.

Further, although the strongest predictor of teacher expectations in elementary and secondary schools is prior achievement, this factor has not been found to moderate university teachers' expectations. Batten and colleagues (2013) recruited 15 experienced teachers from eight higher education institutions across England, Scotland, and Wales, and asked them to grade final year undergraduate student essays after carefully reading the description of the student's prior academic profiles. The academic profiles were manipulated so that participants were led to believe that the student whom they would grade had a good, average, or poor prior academic performance. The results showed that there were no significant differences in the marks awarded to the essays of students with supposed good, average, or poor prior academic achievement.

Apart from demographic features and prior achievement, some student psychosocial factors may play a role in university teachers' expectations. For example, it may be that university teachers develop favourable expectations for students who are perceived as more motivated and engaged, who are more assertive in class activities, who have more friendly relationships with the teachers, and so on. However, such factors have not been well explored within tertiary settings. One

qualitative study asked 14 teachers, early in the first year, to predict the chance of successful completion of the Bachelor's programme for each of their students and analysed the reasoning behind these teachers' judgements (Wijnia et al., 2016). Findings indicated that university teachers tended to build their expectations with reference to students' engagement and motivation, rather than the cognitive abilities shown in students' prior educational experiences.

Further, in terms of findings relating teacher demographics to expectations, though there are a minimal number of studies, a different pattern in higher education from other school levels has been found. One study (Li, 2017) investigated 50 university teachers and the variation of their expectations depending on teachers' gender, age, work experience, and educational background. The results showed that teacher gender did not moderate university teachers' expectations. However, it seemed that teachers who were younger, had less work experience, and had higher academic degrees tended to have higher expectations than older teachers, with more work experience, but holding lower-level degrees.

Similarly with the research on students, there is a lack of exploration into university teachers' psychosocial factors which may be related to their expectations. For example, teachers' pedagogical beliefs and teaching self-efficacy, although studied at lower school levels, still remain unexplored in tertiary institutions. The

existing research, such as that by Batten and colleagues (2013), introduced earlier, explored teacher expectations in higher education settings but did not ask university teachers why prior achievement information had not influenced their grading of essays. The research by Li (2017), although it did identify some teacher characteristics that appeared to relate to teacher expectations, did not explore any psychosocial factors that may have contributed to the teachers' expectations. Thus, there is reason to believe that the evidence to date is insufficient to depict a panorama of teacher expectations within higher education.

According to a recent large-scale study which has empirically investigated the impact of teacher expectations on tertiary student outcomes (Li & Rubie-Davies, 2017), there were strong resemblances between teacher expectation values in each class ( $ICC(1) = 0.23$ ,  $ICC(2) = 0.92$ ). Teacher expectation data were then aggregated at the class level, which suggested that university teachers were likely to hold normatively high or low expectations for all the students in their class. The same study also reported a medium to large group effect of teacher expectations at university. Specifically, for each increment in teacher expectations for individual students, and class-level teacher expectations, student year-end achievement was predicted to increase by 4.55 and 9.54 points respectively. Given the homogeneity of teacher expectations for the overall class and pronounced class-level effects, the

current study was designed to pinpoint the potential sources of university teachers' expectations, with a particular focus on the teachers' class-level expectations. The overarching research question for this study was: What factors do university teachers identify when developing expectations for student academic expectations?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 20 teachers from two universities in southwest China, who taught English as a foreign language to first-year undergraduates. The English-as-a-foreign-language course is a compulsory one and would last for two years. The teacher is responsible for his or her assigned classes for two years and gives lessons for 4 hours per week. These participants were randomly selected from the potential participants who had participated in another study by the first author (Li & Rubie-Davies, 2017) and varied in gender, age, work experience, and educational background. The demographic details for these teachers are provided in Table 1, along with their pseudonyms. Their students were non-English major freshmen from various faculties or schools. The faculties or schools allocated the students randomly into classes of 40-45 members and the universities

assigned the classes randomly to each English-as-a-foreign-language teacher. As a result, each class consisted of students with the same major, such as politics, psychology, engineering, mathematics, botany, and so on.

[Table 1 near here]

### **Data collection**

The teacher interviews were conducted three weeks after the teachers met with their new students at the beginning of the school year. Each teacher was interviewed by the first author for approximately 30 minutes and all interviews were completed within one week. A semi-structured interview protocol was adopted to explore how the teachers developed expectations for student academic achievement. The semi-structured interview protocol (see Table 2) consisted of core questions that all teachers were asked. In addition, some prompts were added to each question to be used in situations where teachers gave only minimal responses. Examples of some additional prompts are also provided in Table 2. All teachers were encouraged to share details, examples, or explanations to clarify their answers if they wanted to or if the interviewer felt that further information could be gleaned by delving more deeply into the teachers' responses. All the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts were translated into English and sent back to the

participants for checking and clarification.

## **Materials**

The interview questions in Table 2 were designed to explore the teachers' expectations for student academic achievement, with particular attention paid to the possible sources of their expectations. At times, additional prompts were used to enable a deeper understanding of the university teachers' perspectives. Students' academic achievement was, in this study, represented by their performance in the College English Test (CET) which would be held at the end of the school year. A major goal of the teachers' work in the first year of the undergraduate program was to help students succeed in the CET. Students have two years to pass this test but, in some classes, students are able to achieve the required standard in one year. This standardised test is held annually and has existed in China for 26 years. The CET is mandatory for university students in China who are not English majors. It is a prerequisite for a bachelor's degree; many employers in China also prefer applicants with CET certification.

In relation to prior achievement the teachers were given their students' English scores in the College Entrance Examination when they were assigned their classes. The College Entrance Examination is a nationwide standardised examination which every student has to sit, and students' achievement in the examination determines

whether or not they can enter tertiary institutions. Hence, the teachers had information about the students' prior achievement that may have formed a basis for their expectations in the end-of-year CET examination.

[Table 2 near here]

### **Data coding**

Since this study was designed to explore possible sources of university teachers' expectations, an inductive approach— grounded theory— was used to produce substantive codes from a corpus of data, and to develop a systematic theory at a broader conceptual level (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first author read through all the transcriptions several times to become familiar with what the participants had said in the interviews. The transcriptions were coded manually and given conceptual labels, following the fundamental analytic process of open, axial, and selective coding. In the second round, the labels were rigorously studied. Relationships between repeated concepts were compared and integrated to tentatively categorise the bases of teacher expectations. A range of subcategories and categories emerged, for example:

Category: Students' majors

Subcategories: Science students are difficult; arts students always perform well; law school students are clever and hardworking...

Category: Students' motivation

Subcategories: Precondition for the bachelor degree; advantage in job-hunting; demand of social development...

Category: Teachers' teaching self-efficacy

Subcategories: Confidence in my ability; effective instructions; my influence is limited...

The third round of data coding resulted in the unification of the categories and subcategories by which the core categories and the final framework were constructed. Two core categories—student characteristics and teacher characteristics—eventually were identified to represent two major sources of university teachers' expectations. Another researcher experienced in qualitative methodology proofread the transcripts and coded 15% of the transcriptions to verify the final coding; an agreement rate of more than 90% between the two coding versions ( $Kappa = .91, p < .001$ ) was achieved.

## **Results**

The data analysis yielded major sources of university teachers' expectations,

which included both student and teacher characteristics. Four student characteristics emerged: 1) prior academic achievement, 2) motivation, 3) study skills, and 4) academic discipline. Two teacher factors also seemed to play a role: 1) past teaching and learning experience and 2) teaching self-efficacy.

### **Student characteristics as sources of university teachers' expectations**

#### ***Prior academic achievement***

All teachers regarded students' prior achievement as the main source of their expectations. These scores were obtained from the College Entrance Examination described earlier. The teachers commonly regarded students' scores in the College Entrance Examination as an authoritative representation of academic achievement prior to higher education.

Indicative of the responses, Mandy commented, "Oh, most of my students would pass the [CET] test. I have already checked their scores in the College Entrance Exam ... for most of them, they seemed quite good; that means they have excellent prior achievement. They worked hard in senior high school; I believe they are well prepared for learning in university." Harriet responded, "Let me guess, hmm, 70 per cent of my students will make it. My prediction is based on their English language competence. They exhibited fantastic reading and writing abilities

in the College Entrance Examination.”

### ***Motivation***

The teachers’ answers also indicated a few other characteristics of students as influencing teachers’ expectations for students’ CET achievement. To begin with, students’ test-taking motivation was specifically highlighted. Gayle stated, “I don’t worry about my students’ achievement in the upcoming test. Nowadays everyone realises the importance of learning foreign languages, so most students work for it with great effort. Of course, there are a few who have no interest in English at all; I wouldn’t be surprised if these guys have difficulty in the test.” Eric also responded, “The students take the College English Test seriously; passing it is a must-have for graduation and job hunting. Therefore, most of them are greatly motivated and work very hard even without supervision; every effort they make will pay off in the test or in other ways.”

### ***Study skills***

Furthermore, the students’ study skills were viewed as important factors in the teachers’ predictions. For example, Cameron believed that students’ perseverance was essential to academic success. He said, “My students read English articles aloud for half an hour every day and do dictation exercises three times a week. I suggested that they do those things, and so far they have become daily routines. They really

keep doing those jobs every day, every week. Their work makes me feel confident about their future achievement.” In relation to students’ study skills, learning autonomy was most commonly highlighted by the interviewees as contributing to their success. Participants commonly highlighted the importance of being independent and self-driven in study. Andrea commented, “In university, unlike in high school, the teacher won’t always keep an eye on the student, so the student should learn to schedule time, set goals, and work independently! However, some students don’t know what to study and how to study. Obviously they will have a tough time through [the course] or even fail university.” Louise said, “I can see the students are adjusting their learning styles to the tertiary teaching styles, and their self-discipline is impressive. Many students preview the textbook before lectures, and manage to do extra exercises and quizzes after class. They read extensively and ask lots of questions. I believe those extra activities can help them to achieve well.”

### *Academic discipline*

Another factor in the teachers’ expectations was the academic disciplines in which the students majored. It seemed that the teachers had developed stereotypes regarding interdisciplinary differences in language learning. Alistair explained his expectations for students by saying, “I have two classes; students in Class One are geography majors, and students in Class Two, mathematics. They are all, you know,

science guys. Students majoring in science usually have little interest in language and poor language competence.” David tried to account for his expectations for students majoring in chemistry and biology by stating, “They have extremely tight schedules, lots of lectures, experiments and workshops, so it’s not surprising if they do not achieve as well as other students, given very limited time for learning a foreign language.” Similar opinions were also found in other teachers’ replies. For example, Kathryn commented, “I am working with students from the Psychology Faculty and Business School this year. I really have high expectations for them. Students from those two schools are fantastic; I find they are generally very smart, maybe because their majors are to explore the sophisticated human mind and behaviour! In addition, they are ambitious, assertive, and are working really hard. They are eager to obtain high scores in the test and very thorough in their study.” Beverley reported, “I am afraid my students won’t achieve a lot in learning English-as-a-foreign language. Because they are students from the teacher education programme, that is, student teachers, very probably they will work as middle school teachers after graduation. Learning English, hence, is not that meaningful to them, since their future work won’t have much of a demand for a foreign language.”

## **Teacher characteristics as sources of university teachers' expectations**

### ***Past teaching and learning experience***

Participating teachers' responses suggested that their expectations of student academic achievement were also related to the teachers themselves. One distinct teacher variable seemed to be the teachers' personal experiences. Based on work experience with previous students, the teachers appeared to expect similar achievement of current students. Greg explicitly stated, "To an extent, my expectations are based on my past experience. I have always successfully enhanced students' learning. That can be proved by my former students' achievement." Christie said, "I expect 50-60% of my students to pass the test...I've been doing this for dozens of years; the pass rate is kind of stable. You see, students come every year with a generally similar academic background, learn similar things, and I teach them in a similar way. It's no wonder that they eventually get similar results."

Furthermore, the teachers tended to incorporate their own learning experience, what they personally had encountered as students, into their expectations of current students' learning. Janet told the interviewer, "Here's another reason for my expectations—my own experience as a student. I mean my experience of attending the exams as a college student years ago; that was not too hard for me. I remember I

scored quite high. [If] I can succeed in the test, so can my students. I also graduated from this university, and these students can surely do what I did.” Fiona also shared, “The College English Test has been conducted for decades. Every student has to go through it. It won’t be a big problem; I know that because I was there. If one works hard, she can make it.”

### ***Teaching self-efficacy***

Another major teacher characteristic that seemed to be related to university teachers’ expectations was teachers’ teaching self-efficacy, beliefs in one’s capabilities to “bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 783). Those whose efficacy appeared poor also seemed unsure of how to overcome their perceived deficiencies and consequently had negative expectations of student outcomes. Bob commented, “I don’t think highly of myself. To be honest, attending classes is not sufficient for the important upcoming test; I believe students should learn autonomously and find their own ways of learning. However, the problem is I don’t know how to help them to find the right way; it is impossible to anticipate that my teaching will be as good as that of the famous professors. Experienced professors have better techniques and strategies. If they were teaching these students, I guess, the students would achieve at higher levels.”

Diane said, “My capabilities in promoting student achievement are not that influential ... I can only say that I am trying my best ... and there are too many students. If I want to help each of my students, it is impossible. There are too many difficulties.” Elizabeth said, “I am not a bad teacher, kind of capable in terms of teaching, but not very much ... I am attentive towards my students; they can get something from my lectures. But there are only three classes per week; what I can do is limited in such a short time. My work does help students’ learning, but not substantially. That’s one of the reasons that I believe my students will just achieve at an average level, if compared with other students.”

On the other hand, some teachers showed firm beliefs in their capabilities to enhance student learning and reported seemingly high expectations of their students. Fred explained, “The ability and effects of my teaching are fairly good; I can see my students are satisfied with my work and they do follow my instructions. I own the ability to create a positive classroom climate for my students which I believe is the most important thing in learning a foreign language. Within a positive and comfortable learning environment, students are inspired to speak, to read, to write, and so on. Consequently, no wonder their language competence will be substantially promoted during this year.” Iris reported, “I like to guide my students to adjust their learning strategies. I usually design interesting tasks, which require specific

strategies. I am capable of influencing the students, in a silent but profound way, and then they will make changes and improve. Well, I believe my work really contributes to a wonderful learning atmosphere in the class. Some girls used to be shy and silent, but with my help, they have become actively involved in the learning activities. My students are keen to practise; they are not afraid of making errors; and they are definitely achieving something—as they deserve!”

### **Discussion**

In an exploratory study, the bases of university teachers’ expectations for student future achievement were investigated. Drawing on data from 20 English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers who taught in tertiary settings, the university teachers’ expectations seemed to be built upon certain characteristics of students and teachers. From the participants’ responses, it seemed that university teachers, when developing expectations, specifically highlighted students’ prior achievement, test-taking motivation, study skills and autonomous learning, and the academic discipline to which the students belonged. The teachers’ personal experience and self-efficacy also appeared to contribute to their expectations.

Some of the findings seemed to be related to the context in which the current study was carried out. One was that students’ motivation would account for

university teachers' expectations. To a degree, the teachers predicted that students would achieve well because they would be extrinsically motivated by the desire to obtain their academic degrees and to gain promising careers. Previous research (Wijnia et al., 2016) has suggested that student motivation is an important base that university teachers build expectations upon. However, the study above discussed students' general motivation to learn (desire to know), whereas it seemed that the teachers in the current study focused on students' test-taking motivation. The CET, coupled with external consequences, is an important examination to test takers in Chinese higher education. Students must pass it and they strive for high scores, because success in the CET is a precondition of graduation in most domestic universities and a qualification for sought-after employment positions. It is no wonder that teachers and CET test-takers attach more importance to that test in relation to their academic degree and future jobs than other motivators (Cheng et al., 2014). Therefore, given the importance of the CET, it is plausible that the teachers in this study highlighted students' test-taking motivation as a meaningful ingredient of expectations.

The finding that these university teachers appeared to rely greatly on students' prior achievement for developing their expectations may be also related to the context of the current study. This finding is contrary to that of previous research. Batten

and colleagues (2013) assessed university teachers' expectations by using vignettes of imaginary students and found that there was no significant difference among teacher expectations for students with high or low prior achievement. A recent qualitative study (Wijnia et al., 2016) explored the factors that university teachers would base their expectations on and the results also revealed that the teachers' judgements were mostly built upon their perceptions of students' engagement and motivation, rather than students' cognitive performance as revealed in previous examinations. It seemed, therefore, that student prior achievement did not always shape teacher expectations in tertiary institutions. One possible explanation for the inconsistency between existing literature and the findings in the current study, may be that students' prior achievement in the current study was measured by the College Entrance Examination which is a national test and carries enormous weight in the Chinese education system. Every university candidate must sit it and generally the results of the test, rather than any other privileges, decide whether one can go to college or not and which university one is qualified for. Given the high stakes of the College Entrance Examination, it can be anticipated that these university teachers in China may therefore have viewed students' prior academic performance as a critical factor in their expectations, perhaps more so than their western peers. Another reason might be that the teachers in the current study lectured comparatively small-size classes

which met on a regular basis with intense teacher-student contact. Given more frequent teacher-student interactions, this may have meant that the teachers were more aware of their students' prior achievement. Seminars and lectures with larger numbers of participants, which previous research has investigated, may mean that university teachers in those situations lack an awareness of students' prior achievement and so use other student factors to form their expectations, such as student participation in class.

A finding from the current study was that the teachers took students' independent study skills into consideration when predicting students' future achievement. The quotes showed that the teachers insightfully considered whether a student was used to working and studying independently or not. The university teachers were convinced of an increasing demand for college students' self-driven study and learning, especially during the transition from secondary to tertiary institutions (Coertjens, Donche, Maeyer, Daal, & Petegem, 2017). Thus, they seemed to make judgements about student future achievement depending on whether or not the college students were applying autonomous learning strategies. Though student autonomy as influencing teachers' expectations has not been reported in the expectation literature, the participants' perception in the current study seemed robust because the research on tertiary student academic success has revealed that

autonomous learning strategies, even more than high school scores, are important correlates of students' grade point average (GPA) in university (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012).

In addition, university teachers' expectations also seemed to be linked to which faculty students came from, which may suggest stereotypical expectations related to academic disciplines. These teachers seemed to form high or low expectations for all the students in a specific academic domain, which seemed to reflect an implicit bias related to learning within tertiary settings. No similar results have been documented in the existing literature and it must be remembered that this was a very small sample of teachers. Nevertheless, research at the tertiary level has shown that the disciplines are often categorised into the hard (natural science and science-based professions) or soft (humanities, social science and social science-based professions) dimensions (Biglan, 1973). A growing body of work has provided evidence that students' cognitive style, epistemology, learning strategies, motivation, engagement, and preferred teaching approaches are likely to vary across the hard and soft disciplines (e.g., Hofer, 2000; Leach, 2016). Meanwhile, disciplinary differences have also been found among teachers in their beliefs about the teaching mode which leads to effective learning, how the curriculum should be structured, what the purpose of education is, the relevance and benefits of assessment, and so on

(see Neumann, 2001 for a review). It is possible that foreign language university teachers knew about these purported disciplinary differences and internalised the differences into their own pedagogical beliefs. When teachers generalise such beliefs for all students of a particular discipline, stereotyped, domain-specific expectations may emerge. Unfortunately, the qualitative methodology used in the current study did not enable us to measure this seeming bias towards students in particular disciplines as potentially influencing the university teachers' expectations nor were we able to measure student outcomes if teachers were biased. These would be interesting areas for exploration in future research.

Apart from student characteristics, the current study also found that individual differences in teachers seemed to be a probable source of teacher expectations, which added weight to the existing literature arguing that teacher expectations, especially expectations for intact student groups, are likely to be a function of teacher variables (Li & Rubie-Davies, 2017; Rubie-Davies, 2007). Firstly, it seemed from the teacher responses that their own work and learning experiences may have played a part in their expectations. These teachers seemed to hold unchanging expectations for the different students they taught, reporting beliefs that their previous work experience and former students' achievement were likely to reoccur in their current cohort of students. It seemed to the teachers that former cohorts of students had achieved at

high (or low) levels in previous years and, therefore, there were reasons for the teachers to expect similar achievement of the newcomers in the current year.

Furthermore, the teachers appeared to believe that their own past learning experiences and outcomes would be replicated with their current students. Although previous studies have not documented this in the expectation field, a large body of research in the area of teacher beliefs has long established that past experience plays a powerful role in shaping teachers' ideas and actions (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Rijswijk, Akkerman, Schaap, & Tartwijk, 2016). Previous significant episodes, events, or personal experience in work and learning may lead teachers to filter and interpret new information, to redefine, distort or reshape subsequent thinking and information processing, and ultimately to monitor and modify their decision making. Such experience-based beliefs incorporated into the belief structure early on are difficult to alter, and the beliefs tend to persevere even when faced with contradictory information (Pajares, 1992). Teacher expectations—related to teacher beliefs—may share this affective, episodic nature. That is possibly why the teachers reported that their work experience with former students and their own personal learning experience seemed to shape their perceptions and comprehension of their current students, and, consequently, resulted in the teachers' predictions and expectations.

Another characteristic that these teachers seemed to base their expectations on

was their teaching self-efficacy. According to the teachers' self-report in the present study, some teachers did not have strong faith in their abilities to help their students learn; they regarded their work as not very influential. Worryingly, they seemed to have no effective solution for this dilemma. They either reported that they had no idea what to do or blamed extraneous factors such as the limited lecturing time for their inability to make a substantial difference to their students' learning. As a result, the teachers in the current study who seemed to have poor self-efficacy tended to accept that their students would underperform in academic tasks. However, there were other teachers who seemed to have comparatively higher self-efficacy in teaching and described the impact of their work on students as substantial. They had confidence in facilitating students' learning and set clear goals for doing so, for example, creating a positive classroom climate and designing special tasks to enhance their students' learning. By proceeding with their designed agenda of enabling student learning, they seemed to expect the students to react in a positive way and consequently achieve at high levels. Although there has been debate about the correlation between teacher expectations and self-efficacy in elementary (Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012) and secondary schools (Archambault et al., 2012), the current study provided some qualitative evidence about a possible relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and expectations in tertiary education. One possible

explanation for the equivocal findings may be differences between school and university. Teachers in tertiary settings may refer to their self-efficacy when forming expectations for students' learning, because, as shown in the current study, the teachers with higher self-efficacy seemed to be confident in their instructional methods and strategies to enhance student learning, whereas the teachers with lower self-efficacy appeared to be uncertain about how to adapt their teaching to high-end cognitive learning tasks. Unlike university teachers, school teachers tend to perceive that classroom behaviour management is their most challenging task and, therefore, their behaviour management can modify their self-efficacy (Ma & Cavanagh, 2018; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012). On the other hand, at the university level, possibly because students attend voluntarily (Babad, 2009), behaviour management is generally not an issue. Hence, primary and secondary school teachers, whether they have strong beliefs in their own teaching capabilities or not, perhaps relate self-efficacy closely to their effectiveness in relation to class management and student engagement rather than to their ability to make a difference to student academic gains.

Some student characteristics which have been widely documented as major bases of teacher expectancies in elementary or secondary schools, such as their ethnic group (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007), SES (Gut et al., 2013), and so on, did not emerge as a prominent subcategory from data analysis in the current study. One possible

reason may be that there was limited variation in SES, ethnicity, and gender across classes in the current study. More importantly, however, the lack of demographic factors as influencing these university teachers' expectations may be accounted for by features of tertiary settings. One recent study in higher education also reported that student demographic characteristics were hardly mentioned in university teachers' explanations of their expectations (Wijnia et al., 2016). Unlike elementary or secondary schools, higher education in most countries is not compulsory, which means universities and colleges normally have specific criteria established for the candidates. University teachers, thus, may believe that the students are qualified in a general sense since they have been admitted. Further, few students from low socioeconomic groups or ethnic minority groups attend university anyway and, therefore, the population at universities is far more homogenous than that in primary and secondary schools (Smith, 2012). Therefore, the effects of potentially stigmatising student information on teacher expectations are likely to be buffered in higher education. Also, given the nature of the qualitative methods used in the current study, it is probable that teachers would be unwilling to openly report their bias towards stigmatised student groups, if they did hold bias, but also, the sample of teacher participants was small and so will not reflect the possible divergence of views across a larger group of tertiary teachers.

To sum up, the current study identified some factors that university teachers appeared to rely on to form their expectations for student learning. Among those, only one factor (student motivation) partially confirmed previous research, but most seemed to be new and had not been documented before in the existing literature, including students' autonomy and academic discipline, teachers' past experience, and teachers' teaching self-efficacy. Although it is acknowledged that these results were from a small qualitative study, these findings could provide new insights into what has been neglected in the literature in relation to the formation of expectations. Future research may gain a more detailed and fine-grained view of the bases of university teacher expectations, if these factors were to be measured in larger studies.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There were some limitations to the current study. The teacher participants' self-report yielded some new findings and some results that differed from those of previous research. However, conclusions based on qualitative investigations should be adopted with caution. Further research needs large-scale quantitative analysis whereby findings can be more generalisable. Another limitation is that the current study investigated teachers' expectations at the beginning of the school year, the early stage of teacher-student interactions. It is possible that teachers may modify their

expectations with more and further interactions with students, and the bases of expectations may change. In order to have a dynamic understanding of teacher expectations, a longitudinal study is warranted. Further, the current study focussed on university teachers' expectations for students' achievement in a high-stakes test rather than for learning in a general sense. It is possible that some results may be challenged in future studies, for example, the highlighting of students' test-taking motivation.

In addition, the findings of the current study derived from the EFL context where students interact closely with teachers. The results may not be transferable to other courses with larger classes such as seminars and lectures, because the teacher-student interaction may be less frequent than it is likely to be in the EFL course. Possible differences between the Chinese and western contexts should also be taken into account when considering the findings in relation to tertiary educational practice more broadly. For example, in western systems, students' academic achievement is not as pivotal as it is in China for determining admission to the university, and there is no high-stakes test during the undergraduate programme in western contexts, the results of which decide the achievement of an undergraduate degree and future career, in the way that this occurs in China. For example, the attainment of an engineering degree (or any other undergraduate degree) is dependent on the results of an English

language test in China (the CET mentioned earlier). Findings could, therefore, be different if similar research were to be undertaken in a western context.

### **Conclusion**

The current study, although small and qualitative in nature, has explored teachers' perceptions of how teacher expectations are formed at the tertiary level. Expectations at this level have been virtually ignored in the literature. However, understanding how teacher expectations develop and are maintained is of vital importance, because expectations are often the precursor of teachers' follow-up differential behaviours, which in turn, may be associated with different learning experiences and outcomes for students. The evidence suggests that teacher expectations may embody the integration of both student and teacher characteristics. That is, although research has shown that student characteristics are related to teacher expectations (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006), there has also been evidence (Brophy & Good, 1974) for over 40 years, that in primary schools some teachers generate greater expectation effects than others. The current study certainly suggested that the teachers used both student information as well as their own beliefs to form their expectations. However, researchers do not yet fully understand the degree to which student characteristics contribute to teacher expectations versus the

role of teacher beliefs in moderating the expectation effects. What is known is that high teacher expectations lead to greater student gains (Gut et al., 2013) and, therefore, it is important to raise the bar of teacher expectations so that all students are given as much opportunity as possible to succeed within the tertiary educational realm.

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Table 1

*Demographic Details and Pseudonyms for 20 Teacher Interviewees*

Teacher No	Uni.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Work experience	Degree
1	1	Andrea	51+	F	21+	BA
2	1	Beverley	31-40	F	11-20	MA
3	2	Christie	41-50	F	21+	BA
4	2	Diane	41-50	F	21+	MA
5	1	Elizabeth	25-30	F	1-10	MA
6	1	Fiona	41-50	F	21+	BA
7	1	Gayle	31-40	F	11-20	PhD
8	2	Harriet	31-40	F	11-20	MA
9	2	Iris	41-50	F	21+	MA
10	1	Janet	25-30	F	1-10	MA
11	1	Kathryn	25-30	F	1-10	PhD
12	2	Louise	41-50	F	21+	MA
13	2	Mandy	31-40	F	11-20	MA
14	1	Alistair	41-50	M	11-20	PhD
15	1	Bob	25-30	M	1-10	MA
16	2	Cameron	31-40	M	11-20	MA
17	1	David	31-40	M	11-20	MA
18	1	Eric	31-40	M	11-20	PhD
19	1	Fred	25-30	M	1-10	MA
20	2	Greg	25-30	M	1-10	MA

Table 2

*The Interview Protocol*

Core questions	Exemplary Prompts
What are your expectations for CET achievement of most students in your class?	Do you think most of your students will pass the CET? What range of scores do you believe most students will achieve in CET?
What are your expectations based on?	Please describe the characteristics of the students for whom you have high or low expectations. Do you think there will be a huge achievement gap between the students in your class, why or why not? Will you frequently modify your expectations, why or why not?
What factors in your opinion could have substantial effects on student learning?	What student behaviours do you consider could promote their learning? Do you think the teacher plays a role in student learning? If so, please name the teacher characteristics or behaviours and explain how. Do you think the context factors play a role in student learning? If so, please name the specific factors and explain how.
How would you describe your ability to promote student learning?	Do you think you are a capable teacher? Please give examples of your work (such as instructional design, classroom management, interaction with students, teaching strategies, etc.) that help students a lot.

Among all first-year undergraduates at the university, do you believe your students will perform better in the College English Test than those in other teachers' classes? Why or why not?

Who should be responsible for the students' over-performance or under-performance in the CET, you or your students?

Are there differences between your students and students of other teachers? If yes, please provide details.

Do you believe it is you that makes difference to student learning? Why or why not?

Do you perceive yourself as a better teacher than your peers, why or why not?