

## **Through Their Eyes: Exploring International Students' College Life in Korea Using Photovoice**

International students represent the most rapidly increasing immigrant group in Korea. Despite this, their challenges and sources of support in college life remain underexplored, with most previous studies relying on traditional methodologies, such as surveys or interviews. This study adopts a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, utilizing photovoice to uncover international students' perceptions and experiences of their lives in Korea, allowing them to share their narratives through visual and verbal expression.

We applied photovoice, a participatory research method, empowers participants to document and communicate their lived experiences through photography. It emphasizes collaboration, reflection, and action, enabling participants to actively shape the research process. In this study, we recruited 20 international undergraduate students who had completed at least one semester in Korea. To ensure focus on international experiences, individuals born in Korea, holding Korean nationality, or possessing native Korean language proficiency were excluded. Participants were asked to capture photographs representing their college life and then participated in group discussions centered on their photos. These discussions provided a platform for dialogue and collective meaning-making. Transcriptions of the group discussions were analyzed using grounded theory to uncover key themes and patterns. Additionally, the student life cycle model was integrated to frame the findings and contextualize the experiences across various stages of their academic journey.

Photovoice analysis revealed that international students in Korea face pervasive language barriers that significantly affect all stages of the student life cycle. These barriers contributed to difficulties in accessing information during enrollment, navigating course registration amidst limited Korean proficiency and time zone challenges, and participating in academic and social activities throughout the semester. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues, deepening isolation and participation barriers. Additionally, international students with disabilities and those identifying as sexual minorities experienced compounded vulnerabilities. Despite feelings of low self-efficacy and limited resources, international students emphasized the critical role of peer support networks, school events fostering a sense of connection, and transnational ties as key sources of support.

Policy implications highlight the need for universities to implement targeted initiatives, such as multilingual resources, mentor-mentee systems, and enhanced support for course registration and extracurricular integration, particularly for international students entering during nontraditional semesters. Theoretically, by framing international students' challenges within the distinct stages of the student lifecycle, this study provides a dynamic perspective on how their experiences evolve over time and are influenced by institutional, linguistic, and societal factors. Methodologically, it emphasizes the value of photovoice in amplifying marginalized voices and driving actionable change, as demonstrated by the institutional responses to participants' photo-based advocacy.