

## Analysis on international student research across the world during the Covid-19 pandemic

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### Abstract

Contrary to the situation before the Covid-19 pandemic, the pandemic has influenced human's well-being in unprecedented ways, especially on international student's mental health across the world. The purpose of this study is to explore international student's research trend in terms of mental health and counseling. To this end, with literary research method, this study reviewed those researches conducted in Korea and across the world, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, this study suggested the future research direction and agendas of international student after the Covid-19 pandemic. This study will contribute to calling attention to international students across the world, and making mental health support for them in Korea.

**Keywords:** International student; Covid-19 pandemic; mental health; counseling

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## 1. Introduction

There has been a rise of international students globally, with 5.57 million students studying abroad across the world as of 2018, an increase of 2.86 times during the three decades from 1.95 million students in 1998 (UNESCO, 2021). The-largest-international-student-receiving countries are the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany, and Russia. On the contrary, the-largest-international-student-sending countries are China, India, Germany, Nigeria, France, Saudi Arabia, Central Asian countries, and South-Korea (UNESCO, 2021).

South-Korea, however, has been transforming from one of the largest sending countries of international students into a host country for international students since the 2000s. As of 2020, the total number of international students in Korea was 153,695. Although the number of international students slightly decreased in 2020 because of university closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of international students has increased by more than 10% for four consecutive years from 2016 to 2019 (Ministry of Education, 2020). The number of international students increased 13 times during the 16 years from 12,314 students in 2003, and then exceeded 100,000 students in 2016. Thus, 200,000 students will reside in South-Korea sooner or later. As the total number of enrolled students in domestic higher educational institutions in 2020 was 3,276,327, the portion of international students accounted for 4.7% (Korean Educational Statistics Service, 2019). This is similar to the phenomenon that the number of foreigners residing in Korea accounts for approximately 5% of the total population of Korea.

International students come to Korean higher educational institutions to study Korean language and majors. They reside in Korea for a considerable period of time, ranging from a few months to a few years to a decade. However, Korean people's perspectives toward international students are diverse. To some Korean students studying with international students, they are peers that make them experience cultures of other countries. However, on the other hand, to some Korean students, international students have been recognized as a free rider who entered colleges without competitive entrance examination and receive scholarships easily, and further as a barrier in team project. From the perspective of university administrators, international students are grateful financial resources in the university crisis due to a decrease in the school-aged population from a low birth rate. However, international students may make university administration more complicated due to different languages and cultures.

### 1.1. Purpose of study

International students seem to be a shadow as if they are invisible in Korean society. However, as revealed in the global spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, they were also unreasonably regarded as a public enemy bringing and spreading the pandemic. In this way, Korean people look at international students from various interests and perspectives. The ultimate purpose of this presentation is to improve Korean society's perception of international students as a member of society with right and responsibility, and as a partner that create together a sustainable multicultural society. To this end, this presentation attempts to look at international students in terms of mental health and counseling. This attempt can help to expand the discussion to a more microscopic level beyond the existing policy-making dimension of recruiting and managing international students. Such a detailed level of support as learning counseling, career counseling, and psychological counseling is required to help international students reside comfortably and safely in Korea, overcome difficulties and problems they experience in such a diverse area as study, career, and personal-emotion. Specifically, this presentation throws three questions as follows:

Q1. How have been international students' counseling research conducted BEFORE the Covid-19 pandemic?

Q2. How have been international students' counseling research conducted DURING the Covid-19 pandemic?

Q3. What are future tasks for international students' mental health and counseling support in Korea AFTER the Covid-19 pandemic?

## 2. Methods and Materials

This data collected for this research were qualitative data. The data used was secondary. The data was collected from previous scholars who conducted research in the topic of discussion.

### 2.1. Analysis

Even though the collected data were qualitative, the research analyzed them with quantitative methods. The research made use of statistical methods such as percentages and frequency. The qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Research before the Covid-19 pandemic

#### 3.1.1. International student counseling research trend in U.S.

Pendse and Inman (2017) analyzed 85 international student-focused articles published in journals related to counseling psychology during 34 years (1980-2014). Although only 1.4% of empirical articles focused on international students, those researches had grown rapidly from 0.77% in 1988 to 1.75% in 2014. The most common topics of research themes were categorized as cultural adjustments (34%), psychological health (18%), and help utilization (12%) among 10 content categories. The US research contents in detail are below table 1:

**Table 1: International student research before the Covid-19 in United States**

Category/Subcategory	Freq.	%	Subcategory freq.	%
1. Cultural Adjustments	52	33.99		
1) Acculturation/ acculturative stress/culture shock			26	16.99
2) Language/language proficiency			7	4.58
3) Cultural values/worldviews			10	6.54
4) Length of stay			6	3.92
5) Cross-cultural interaction/negotiations			3	1.96
2. Psychological Health	28	19.30		
1) Depression/anxiety			9	5.88
2) Psychological distress/adjustment concerns			8	5.23
3) Self-esteem/efficacy			5	3.27
4) Perfectionism			5	3.27
5) Drug/alcohol			2	0.65
3. Help Utilization/attitude toward help seeking	18	11.76		
4. Social support/social interaction	13	8.50		
5. Psychotherapy/intervention focused	10	6.54		
6. Racism/discrimination	8	5.23		
7. Identity	9	5.88		
1) Ethnic			3	1.96

2) Racial			3	1.96
3) Development			3	1.96
8. Coping	7	4.58		
9. Career/vocation	5	3.27		
10. Supervision/advising	3	1.96		

Pendse and Inman called for future research beyond solely acculturation experiences and enculturation processes. Students' help utilization needed to extend from university-based formal counseling services to community-based alternative forms of help from friends and families. It was required from a pathological approach to an approach to the international students' strengths, coping, resiliency, and protective factors. Moreover, future researches were mentioned on international students' career and vocational needs, development of culturally responsive counseling theories and techniques, more utilization of qualitative and mixed methodologies.

### 3.1.2. International student counseling research trend in South-Korea

Compared to the above research trend in U.S., Kim and Oh (2017) provided research trend in Korea by analyzing 79 theses and articles published over two decades (1996-2016). Research on international student counseling in Korea has been increasing since 1996, as Korean government's 'Study Korea Project (2004)' caused the rapid inflow of international students and thus the necessity of their management and care.

In a similar way with the U.S. research results (Pendse & Inman, 2017), the most common topic was cultural adjustments (38%), psychological health (25%), and career/vocation (13%) respectively. Interestingly, the third largest content category in Korea was career/vocation, while that in the US research was helping utilization/attitudes toward help seeking. It seemed to reflect a reality that considerable need of international students in Korea was in their own future career and vocation. The Korea research contents in detail are below Table 2:

**Table 2: International student research before the Covid-19 in South-Korea**

@@category/Subcategory	Frequen cy	Percentag e	Frequen cy	Percentag e
1. Cultural Adjustments	53	37.59		
1) Acculturation/ Acculturative stress			24	17.02
2) Adaptation to University life			22	15.60
3) Etcetera			7	4.96
2. Psychological Health	36	25.53		
1) Self-efficacy/esteem			9	6.38
2) Ego-resilience			2	1.42
3) Psychological well-being			3	2.13
4) Depression			3	2.13
5) Self-differentiation			2	1.42
6) Adult-attachment			3	2.13
7) Etcetera			14	9.93
3. Help Utilization/attitude toward help seeking	4	2.84		
4. Social support/social interaction	7	4.96		
5. Psychotherapy/intervention focused	6	4.26		
6. Racism/discrimination	2	1.42		
7. Identity	5	3.55		
8. Coping	7	4.96		
9. Career/vocation	19	13.48		
1) Career barrier			5	3.55
2) Career decision			3	2.13

3) Major/study/learning		4	2.84
4) Etcetera		7	4.96
10. Etcetera	2	1.42	

Consequently, Kim and Oh suggested future research agendas through mapping research discourse in Korea, First, cultural adjustment, as descriptive and prescriptive indicator, was the most important element in international student counseling. Thus, universal (emic, culture-universal) versus specific (etic, culture-specific) characteristics of international students need to be explored through research participation of those student with diverse nationality and ethnicity.

Second, international students' mental health discourse in Korea had been unfolded within the balance between developmental/positive perspective and pathological/negative perspective. However, although mental health included a variety of variables, including demographic, academic, and ethnic variables, it did not deeply deal with what are the most crucial variables to influence their mental health. For this task, qualitative research method will be more necessary. Relation between variables needed to be explored.

Third, career and vocation discourse had been unfolded in Korean research, focusing on personal variable relation. However, personal career-related counseling without structural improvement on career-related environment may face fundamental limitation. In other words, counseling without understanding domestic and international job market or improving friendlier environment for international students may be an armchair argument. In this sense, university's institutional help for international student's future career may be more important than individual counselor or professor's help. Further study needed to deal with environmental factors with personal factors.

### 3.2. A qualitative research on international students in Korea

Using the above discourse as a framework for analysis, Oh (2021) tries to explore the living world of international students in Korea, and further suggested their mental health issues and counseling agendas for their social integration in Korea. Accepting a qualitative case research method, this study was based on interviews with 31 Asian international students studying at undergraduate and graduate schools in Korea from November 2017 to October 2018. The research results are categorized as below Table 3:

**Table 3:** *International student's living world in terms of counseling*

Discourse	Category	Subcategory	Main Contents
<b>Cultural Adjustment</b>	Academic Adjustment	Language	- More frequent use in English than Korea - Burden in doing mistakes - Difficulties in pronunciation - Absence in language dictionary
		Classroom	- Difficulties in presentation, - Difficulties in fully understanding lecture - Exam preparation by memorization
		Professor	- Professor's qualification and interest in me - Foreign professor's necessity
	Social Adjustment	Colleagues	- Help from Korean colleagues - Drinking alcohol

		Ethnic organization	- A pathway for confirming national identity and giving and receiving help
		Relieving Prejudice	- Activities for fact check
	Personal-Emotional Adjustment	Educational culture	- Feeling of alienation in team assignments
		Discrimination	- Difference between Western and Asian students
		Relationship	- Vertical human relationship
		Politics	- Impact of diplomatic relations
	Institutional Attachment	Educational service	- Problem-solving by oneself - Unkind administration
		Economics	- Lack of scholarships - Additional costs
		Foods	- School cafeteria menu without consideration for minorities
	Developmental/positive Perspective	Self-efficacy	- Academic achievement with the help of others - Pride in ethnic culture
		Leisure	- Relieving stress through travel, club, and reading
<b>Psychological</b>		Consideration for foreigners	- Caring experience in hospitals and schools
<b>Health</b>	Pathological/negative Perspective	Loneliness	- Longing for family and friends - No friends to enjoy leisure with
		Shock	- Shock due to prejudice from Korean media
		Counseling	- Difficulty in accessing counseling due to language restrictions
<b>Career and</b>	Personal factors	Career assistance	- Building a bridge between Korea and home country - Lack of education about work culture
<b>Vocation</b>	Environmental factors	Domestic job market	- No benefits in Korea compared to the employment policy of home country - Return to home country, and employment in the international arena

Oh (2021)'s result implies that international students experienced various difficulties in their living world in terms of counseling agendas, that is, cultural adjustment, psychological health, career and vacation. International students individually tried to overcome these difficulties, and despite the help of acquaintances inside and outside of school, they did not receive systematic and proper attention and support from universities, local communities, and governments.

The suggestions presented by Oh (2021) are as follows. First, it is necessary to train and assign experts for counseling for international students. Second, counseling institutions need to provide information and educational programs such as study, university life, and employment at all stages from admission to graduation and employment. Third, it demands a change in Korean society's perspective on international students.

### **3.3. Research on international student's mental health and support during the Covid-19 pandemic**

Very recent researches on international students during the Covid-19 pandemic have commonly mentioned not only the severity of their mental health status but also the absence of institutional care. Main research result across the world is summarized as following Table 4:

**Table 4:** *International student research during the Covid-19*

Target clients	Mental health and Support	References
General population	Huge psychological impact on individuals	Talevi et al (2020)
	Psycho-social impact of Covid-19 especially to marginalized community like immigrants	Dubey et al (2020)
	Common symptoms of anxiety and depression, and self-reported stress	Rajkumar (2020)
University community members	Potential impact on the education and mental health of students and academic staff	Sahu (2020)
	Racism like microaggressions and discrimination. Failure to address such racism issues, reach out those vulnerable students in crisis, and provide systematic support	Cheng (2020)
International students	International Chinese students at risk of Asian-hate crimes, public fear, alienation, and discrimination; Need to build institutional and societal awareness of international students' needs for mental health	Zhai & Du (2020)
	Prioritizing to address college students' mental health and well-being: ensuring students' access to mental health service, and intentional outreach to college students with special circumstances	Liu et al (2020)
	Managing students' anxiety due to Covid-19: Finding scientific information and following the safety instructions	Nadeak et al (2020)

Talevi et al (2020) said that psychological reactions to pandemics in human history include maladaptive behaviours, emotional distress and defensive responses like anxiety, fear, frustration, loneliness, anger, boredom, depression, stress, and avoidance behaviors. Specifically, according to researches on general population, health-care workers, and patients with Covid-19 during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is enough to confirm that the pandemic has a huge psychological impact on individuals. People experienced considerable psychological distress in terms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic symptoms. Global findings are consistent in terms of severity, as most people suffered from mild-moderate level of disturbances, while minority reported severe symptoms (Ayman et al. 2020; Şen et al., 2020; TAŞÇI, 2020; Stavicka-a, 2020; Stavicka-b, 2020).

Dubey et al (2020) surveyed psycho-social impact of Covid-19. All the areas of society are affected by the pandemic, but especially marginalized community's people like international migrant workers and refugees are probably the worst sufferers from such psychosocial issues as depression, stress, stigma of discrimination. In this sense, those marginalized people should be intervened through protection of basic human rights, proper accommodation, adequate supply of water and food, education of hygiene, affordable health care delivery, etc.

In reviewing 28 literature on Covid-19 and mental health, Rajkumar (2020) suggested symptoms of anxiety and depression (16–28%) and self-reported stress (8%) are common psychological reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic, and may be associated with disturbed sleep.

Sahu (2020) highlighted the potential impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education and mental health of students and academic staff in university communities. Especially, many international students have difficulties in having proper accommodation outside those campuses, food, and safety service. Thus, international students need more attention from university staffs, as the pandemic situation may cause them a tremendous level of stress.

Cheng (2020) evaluated that U.S. universities' attention to international students was in a disappointed level from the perspective of an international student administrator in a U.S. university. Many international students, especially Asian students, have experienced micro-aggressions and discrimination especially during the pandemic. However, institutions have been lacking in providing addressing such racism issues and proper interventions. Moreover, international students have been in a magnitude of stress due to worries about their own well-being as well as concerns about their families' safety and health in their home countries. Although mental health issues are a main problem to international students, colleges and universities did not take proactive measures to reach out those students in crisis, and thus systematic support to vulnerable international students should be conducted like counseling with translation, collaborative effort with the international student community.

Zhai and Du (2020) highlighted international Chinese students' mental health care. They not only worried about their families in China but also faced discrimination and isolation in some countries. As some media perpetuated stereotype and prejudice about China, international Chinese students are at risk of Asian-hate crimes, public fear, alienation, and discrimination. Although universities tried to provide counseling service, those resources are often understaffed and unprepared enough to respond the crisis. In this sense, mental health care needs to improve. Specifically, walk-in triage system, collaboration between institutions including counseling training clinics. In other words, care as well as advocacy are needed to build institutional and societal awareness of international students' needs for mental health.

Liu et al (2020) suggested the necessity to prioritize next steps to address college students' mental health and well-being. First priority is the development of strategies to ensure students' access to mental health service. University counseling institutions need to create more flexible models of care, including virtual care options by decreasing barriers to access. Second priority is the intentional outreach to college students with special circumstances. Those who need intentional outreach are international students with considerable limitation in housing, campus-based services, and ability to travel. The strategies require specifically innovative models of care as well as identity-related student assets and strengths, and resilience-promoting factors (Sue et al, 2019: 39).

Nadeak et al (2020) explored how to manage students' anxiety due to Covid-19. The first management method is to find 'the right and correct or scientific information from a trusted source and understand it correctly.' And the second management method is to follow 'the safety instructions for COVID-19 from official and accurate sources.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendation**

The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced on human's well-being in unprecedented way, especially on international student's mental health across the world, and thus the caring strategies should be transformed accordingly. The previous international student counseling research's common



themes like cultural adjustment and psychological health, and help utilization will be certainly changed in terms of priority and severity after the pandemic.

Future research on international student's mental health and counseling needs to consider the following agendas: First, the pandemic has publically revealed the vulnerability of international student's mental health and the insufficiency of its support system. It is related to deeply-rooted prejudice and discrimination to minority in a society. In other words, international student's vulnerability is related to institutional ignorance and social injustice rather than their own intrinsic weakness. Thus, international student counseling should be reconsidered in terms of social justice. In this sense, international student care workers take a variety of roles as a counselor in the counseling center, as a facilitator in empowering their competence, and as an advocate in social justice for the voiceless and the helpless.

Second, international student's mental health needs to be explored in relation to the pandemic. The epidemic or pandemic situations of a critical disease were not yet considered in the previous researches. The pandemic influences on international students as a direct factor in their mental health, and as an indirect factor in forming social atmospheres around international students. Probably, the existing research topics like cultural adjustment and career may be studied in completely different way. Newly-changed university daily life caused by the pandemic may make international students adjust in academic, emotional, social, institutional dimensions in a completely new way. International student's health, especially mental health, in the pandemic era is deeply related to sustainability in higher education .

Third, mental health intervention needs to be developed in such a bidirectional way as student-approach and professionals-approach. While international students should access voluntarily and easily to counseling professionals, counseling professionals should visit and intervene intentionally and appropriately those students in crisis. The preliminary condition for proper intervention is culturally responsiveness. In other words, international student counseling comes from multicultural counseling competence or cultural competence. Multicultural counseling competence is defined as 'aspirational and consists of counselors acquiring awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society (ability to communicate, interact, negotiate, and intervene on behalf of clients from diverse backgrounds), and on organizational/societal level, advocating effectively to develop new theories, practices, policies, and organizational structures that are more responsive to all group.' Thus, top priority after the pandemic in Korea is to educate and train professionals with multicultural counseling competence.

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