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# **Physical versus virtual mobility: the ecological systems of international students studying under different formats**

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## **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

## **Abstract**

The number of international students studying at UK universities is increasing, and these students can choose to study in-person in the UK (physically mobile) or study online in their own country (virtually mobile). Students' experiences are shaped by the environments, and an investigation into the international students studying under different formats is required.

With a particular focus on the perceived influencing elements, this study provides an insight into the environments of in-person and remote students through the lens of ecological systems. The data was collected by semi-structured interviews with international master's students from the same department in a UK university. It is concluded that physically and virtually mobile students' environments were not entirely different. Future studies on the changes in students' environments along with their experience based on students with different backgrounds are recommended.

## **Full paper**

## **Introduction**

As a traditional destination country for international students, the number of international students enrolled in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI) is increasing (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022). International students can choose to come to the UK for their studies, or they can take online distance courses provided by UK HEIs while physically remaining in their own country. In other words, there are two types of internationalisation related to these international students: (a) Internationalisation abroad (IA), which includes all forms of cross-border education, and the physical mobility of students is one of the most referred features (de Wit & Altbach, 2021), and (b) internationalisation at a distance (IaD), which includes all forms of education across borders where students are separated from the education provider by geographical distance, and the virtual mobility of students supported by technology is highlighted (Mittelmeier et al., 2021).

In order to understand the similarities and differences in the experiences of IA and IaD students, it is important to first explore the environments around them. This research adopted the Neo-ecological theory (Navarro & Tudge, 2022), an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), as the main framework to investigate international students' environments. The traditional bioecological theory does not include the digital elements in individual's environments, and the virtual aspects introduced in the Neo-ecological theory can better analyse the environments of international students, particularly when IaD students complete their studies online, and IA students take part in some forms of online activities.

## **Methodology**

I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with international students who studied at a UK university in the academic year of 2021/22 about the elements in the environments that they perceived as influential to their experience. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students can choose to study in-person in the UK or remotely in their own country. The students studied in the same department

(Education), and three types of students were involved in this research: (1) students who studied in-person for their entire programme (IA students); (2) students who studied remotely for their entire programme (IaD students); and (3) students who studied remotely for the first semester and studied in-person for the second semester (IaD+IA students).

## **Findings**

Using bioecological theory and Neo-ecological as a guide, findings were developed regarding microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems. Microsystems refer to the things that have direct contact with the students, while mesosystems are the interactions between the students' microsystems and macrosystems are the cultural elements affecting the students.

Conclusions from the interviews demonstrate the similarities and differences between the environments of IA and IaD students. For example, both IA and IaD students mentioned the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, but IA students were more influenced by the corresponding actions taken by the people around them (microsystem), while IaD students talked more about related policies in the UK and their own country (macrosystem).

The ecological systems in IA and IaD students' environments were analysed. IaD students talked about both physical and virtual microsystems, while IA students paid more attention to their physical microsystems. For instance, most IaD students believed they were influenced by their families (in their physical microsystems) and their supervisors (in their virtual microsystems), while IA students rarely mentioned their families (in their virtual microsystems) but were influenced by their flatmates and lecturers (in their physical microsystems). IA students demonstrated clearer mesosystems, while IaD students argued their physical microsystems and virtual microsystems were mutually exclusive and not connected with each other. Students did not reflect on their exosystems (i.e. social structures indirectly influencing the students) much, but their macrosystems were discussed. Both IA and IaD students reported the culture of communication (such as using emails) and the

willingness to fight for the rights (strike actions) were influential, but IA students experienced cultures (such as social acceptance of diversity) that IaD students would not experience. These findings imply that we cannot assume students with different types of mobility live in distinct environments, and the need for a better understanding of the environments as well as the relationship between the environments and students' experience is highlighted.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I provided insights into the environments of IA and IaD students through the lens of ecological systems. International students' reflections on their environments, with a particular focus on the influencing elements within the environments, were captured. While the forms of mobility of IA and IaD students were different, their ecological systems were not entirely different. Future studies on the changes in students' environments along with their experience are recommended.

## References

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