

Leveraging Visa Services as a Catalyst for University Competitiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) International's strategic transformation of visa service management from a compliance-oriented function into an integrated university business model that supports institutional competitiveness for a better student experience, well-being and financial sustainability. Anchored within Malaysia's higher education internationalization agenda, the research employs a qualitative design using stakeholder surveys amongst international students, administrative officers, and partner agencies. The findings reveal that UTM's operational framework for visa management is aligned with global needs which reflect the implementation via Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and Malaysian Immigration Department (JIM), and has enhanced service efficiency, regulatory compliance, and student satisfaction. Nevertheless, key challenges remain in inter-agency collaboration, digital integration, and the personalization of student support services. The study proposes a performance-driven model emphasizing digital transformation, data analytics, and cross-functional governance to elevate service quality, institutional branding, and revenue generation. The outcomes provide actionable insights for Malaysian universities seeking to enhance their global competitiveness through innovation in international service delivery. By integrating data-driven management, stakeholder collaboration, and student-centred processes, institutions can strengthen their international positioning and contribute to sustained improvements in global rankings and reputational capital. These findings advance the discourse on higher-education internationalization by linking service excellence to institutional strategy and performance.

Keywords: visa management, higher education internationalization

I. INTRODUCTION

The intensifying global competition for international students has compelled universities to reconceptualize traditional administrative functions as strategic drivers of competitiveness and institutional sustainability [1]. Among these, visa management has evolved from a compliance-based process into a strategic component of institutional value creation. By streamlining visa operations and integrating them with the overall student experience, universities can strengthen brand reputation, attract a diverse student population, and enhance financial resilience through academic internationalization [2].

This reorientation positions visa services not merely as regulatory necessities but as differentiating factors that elevate service quality and institutional appeal. Efficient, student-centered visa systems foster satisfaction, reinforce loyalty, and contribute to sustainable international partnerships that enhance global visibility [8].

This study examines how Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) has transformed its visa management and mobility services from a procedural compliance unit into a customer-oriented, performance-based business model. This transformation reflects a wider shift in higher-education management, where administrative functions align with reputational and financial imperatives to sustain competitiveness [7]. The evolution is particularly significant given the complexity of visa policies and their influence on global enrollment patterns [6].

Within this framework, UTM International has strategically navigated regulations set by Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and the Malaysian Immigration Department to develop a robust, competitive service model. This alignment supports Malaysia's agenda to position itself as a leading education hub, leveraging affordability, cultural richness, and institutional quality to attract global talent [5].

By advancing beyond administrative efficiency toward a holistic, student-centric model, this study contributes to the growing discourse on international education management and provides a replicable framework for universities seeking to enhance competitiveness through service innovation [1].

As part of this transformation, UTM also invested in developing an internal digital platform, the International Management System (IMS 2.0), built by UTM programmers to support visa processing, student data management, and operational workflows not covered by the national EMGS system.

A. Normal Administrative Practices

The integration of service innovation within university administrative systems marks a significant shift from compliance-based procedures toward strategic instruments of institutional competitiveness. In higher education, this transformation reflects global pressures to enhance service delivery, strengthen governance, and improve universities' reputational standing.

For Malaysian universities, visa management has become a critical dimension of this transformation, influencing both the quality of international student experience and the financial sustainability of institutions. The adoption of customer-oriented and innovation-driven administrative models allows universities to deliver more efficient, transparent, and student-focused services [1]. These improvements not only reduce procedural bottlenecks but also enhance institutional credibility and competitiveness in attracting global talent.

Scholars note that aligning administrative practices with service-innovation principles enables universities to create value beyond compliance by improving stakeholder trust and promoting long-term sustainability [7]. Digitalization, data-driven governance, and proactive policy alignment have thus become defining features of modern university administration, particularly in the management of international mobility and visa services. Presented below is the standard process flow for visa acquisition for UTM international students.

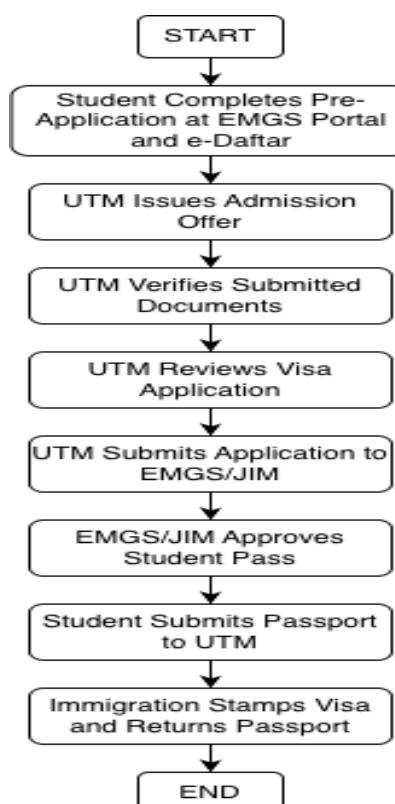


Figure1 Standard process flow for visa acquisition at UTM

B. University Internationalization Administrative Transformation

The process of university internationalization extends beyond academic collaboration to encompass the transformation of administrative functions into strategic enablers of institutional performance and global reach. Scholars have emphasized that higher education institutions must adapt to increasing international competition by integrating operational efficiency, stakeholder engagement, and service innovation into their governance structures.

Strategic transformation in administrative systems is no longer confined to academic exchange or mobility programs but includes the modernization of management practices that support the international student experience and institutional branding. Proactive service strategies, such as digital visa management and integrated student-support models, are essential to maintaining visibility and competitiveness in a globalized education landscape [1].

Recent studies also highlight that sustainable internationalization requires universities to develop internal ecosystems that promote accountability and cross-functional collaboration [7]. These structures allow institutions to balance compliance with innovation, ensuring that administrative reforms contribute to long-term institutional trust and reputation. Within this evolving framework, administrative transformation emerges as a key pillar of university internationalization, linking policy alignment, service quality, and institutional competitiveness.

C. The Role of Visa Management in International Student Experience

Visa management functions as both a regulatory requirement and a crucial determinant of international student satisfaction. Efficient, transparent, and well-communicated visa processes influence not only students' institutional choice but also their academic engagement, loyalty, and overall perception of the host university [2], [6]. Studies indicate that seamless visa procedures alleviate the stress associated with immigration documentation and legal compliance, enabling students to focus on their academic goals and social integration [8].

Effective visa management therefore extends beyond bureaucratic administration; it represents a strategic mechanism that shapes the international student journey and strengthens institutional reputation. In Malaysia, where Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and the Malaysian Immigration Department regulate international student affairs, consistent coordination between universities and these agencies determines service reliability and national appeal as a regional education hub [5]. By aligning visa governance with student-experience priorities, universities can foster trust, promote retention, and enhance competitiveness in the global higher-education marketplace.

D. Service Innovation and Customer Experience in Higher Education

Drawing on service-innovation theory, universities increasingly adopt customer-centric approaches to transform administrative systems into value-creating services [4], [2]. Within higher education, this transformation integrates technological innovation, process redesign, and personalized engagement to enhance communication, transparency, and efficiency. As part of this transformation, UTM also strengthened upstream administrative processes such as eDaftar, the university's official academic registration system that verifies student enrolment status. This registration step is essential for synchronizing academic records with visa processing requirements and ensuring compliance with EMGS and JIM regulations.

Digital transformation, including automation, artificial-intelligence-based advising, and self-service visa platforms, have improved service responsiveness and student empowerment. These innovations enable institutions to anticipate and address student needs more effectively, enhancing satisfaction and institutional loyalty [3].

Service innovation also functions as a strategic differentiator in an increasingly competitive global education market. When universities combine technology with empathy-driven service design, they create trust-based relationships that strengthen reputation and attract international talent. Thus, service innovation not only

improves administrative efficiency but also reinforces the institutional brand as responsive, student-centered, and globally competitive.

E. From Compliance to Strategic Value

Contemporary research increasingly recognizes that administrative compliance, once viewed as a regulatory necessity, can serve as a strategic source of institutional value. When compliance processes are integrated with organizational innovation, they can evolve into value-creating mechanisms that enhance financial performance and institutional reputation [7]. Within the context of higher education, such integration enables administrative functions to contribute directly to strategic outcomes, transforming them into proactive enablers of competitiveness rather than passive governance structures.

Applying this perspective to visa management redefines it from a transactional, rule-bound process into a strategic asset that can generate non-tuition income, strengthen stakeholder trust, and elevate institutional credibility. By aligning visa governance with entrepreneurial and data-driven management practices, universities can create service models that are both compliant and performance-oriented.

Scholars further emphasize that digital transformation and entrepreneurial governance form the backbone of this shift. They enable institutions to embed compliance frameworks within dynamic systems of accountability and innovation, supporting both operational sustainability and global competitiveness (Hashim & Ismail, 2022; Rodrigues & Franco, 2016). As universities navigate increasingly complex regulatory environments, leveraging compliance as a platform for innovation represents a defining feature of modern higher-education management.

F. Research Gap

Although there is an extensive body of literature on university internationalization, few studies explicitly examine visa management as a domain of service innovation within Malaysian higher education. Most prior research has concentrated on student mobility, policy frameworks, or institutional branding, while the administrative mechanisms that operationalize these strategies remain underexplored [1].

Given Malaysia's aspiration to position itself as a regional education hub, understanding how visa services can evolve from compliance-based procedures into strategic business models is both timely and essential. There is a pressing need to investigate how administrative innovation—particularly in visa operations—can contribute to institutional competitiveness, revenue diversification, and improved international student experience [2].

This study addresses this gap by analyzing how Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) has restructured its visa management operations to enhance competitiveness and align administrative reform with national higher-education goals. By exploring UTM International's transformation into a performance-driven, student-centered service unit, this research extends the current discourse on service innovation in higher education and contributes an evidence-based model for Malaysian universities seeking sustainable global positioning.

G. Research Design & Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how UTM has restructured its visa management operations into a strategic service model that enhances customer experience and contributes to institutional income generation. The qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing nuanced stakeholder perspectives, service interactions, and organizational practices that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative methods.

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore stakeholder perceptions and institutional practices surrounding visa management at UTM International, particularly by the visa managing unit, the Student & Scholar Services (I3S). This approach enables a deep understanding of human experiences, organizational culture, and service transformation processes.

This research is situated within UTM, specifically under UTM International, the university's central division responsible for managing international student and staff visa matters, as well as ensuring regulatory compliance

with Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and the Malaysian Immigration Department (Jabatan Imigresen Malaysia, JIM). Originally established as a small administrative unit, UTM International has undergone significant structural evolution in tandem with UTM's broader institutional transformation as a Research University since 2010. Over time, the unit was upgraded to a section under the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic & International) and subsequently formalized as a full-fledged department.

This transformation reflects UTM's strategic commitment to professionalizing international services by integrating visa management within a comprehensive and customer-focused operational framework. The department now oversees the full spectrum of visa-related services for both students and staff, continuously improving its processes in alignment with regulatory updates and institutional policy innovations. These progressive enhancements that anchored UTM's institutional blueprint and internationalization vision, have contributed to measurable advancements in institutional performance, including the university's QS World University Rankings progression from 181st in 2010 to 153rd in 2025. This upward trajectory underscores the role of efficient and student-oriented visa management as a catalyst for strengthening UTM's global standing and competitiveness.

Data were collected through service establishment and semi-structured interviews and stakeholder surveys involving three primary groups:

1. International students who have experienced UTM's visa processing system;
2. Administrative and operational officers from UTM International involved in EMGS submissions, student pass renewals, and policy liaison; and
3. External stakeholders, including EMGS representatives and selected immigration officers who collaborate with UTM.

The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions designed to elicit insights on service quality, communication efficiency, digital support systems, and perceptions of institutional professionalism. Complementary surveys captured broader patterns of satisfaction, challenges, and improvement suggestions from a larger group of respondents.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2019) [9], which provides a systematic and flexible approach to interpreting qualitative data. This method was selected for its suitability in uncovering patterns of meaning across diverse stakeholder perspectives regarding visa management, service delivery, and institutional performance.

The analysis began with a familiarization phase, where all interview transcripts and survey responses were repeatedly reviewed to ensure deep engagement with the data. This was followed by inductive coding, in which transcribed interviews and survey responses were systematically coded to identify recurring themes such as service efficiency, digital transformation, staff responsiveness, policy navigation, and perceived value creation. In the theme development phase, related codes were consolidated into broader conceptual categories reflecting the study's key focus on service improvement and institutional competitiveness.

Subsequent reviewing and refining phases ensured that emerging themes were coherent, representative, and aligned with the research objectives. Each theme was then clearly defined and named, allowing for precise interpretation of how UTM International's visa management practices contribute to enhancing student experience and generating non-tuition income. Finally, in the reporting phase, the thematic findings were synthesized into a cohesive narrative linking empirical insights with existing literature on international education management and university business models.

This analytical process ensured credibility, transparency, and analytical depth, producing evidence-based insights into how strategic reforms in visa management can enhance institutional sustainability and global competitiveness.

The findings were then triangulated across stakeholder groups to ensure validity and to identify converging and diverging perspectives regarding UTM's visa management performance and its contribution to institutional competitiveness and revenue diversification.

Applying a service innovation lens to visa management, this study advances the methodological discourse on higher education administration by illustrating how procedural functions can be reframed as strategic drivers of institutional competitiveness. The approach bridges service innovation theory and university management practice, offering a context-specific framework for transforming compliance-based operations into value-generating business models.

The findings demonstrate that student-centered and efficient visa management functions not only as a compliance mechanism but as a catalyst for institutional sustainability, in which enhancing financial diversification, operational efficiency, and global reputation. By employing a qualitative design grounded in stakeholder perspectives, the study also reveals dimensions of institutional performance, such as responsiveness and digital integration, which is often overlooked in quantitative evaluations. This methodological orientation provides a replicable model for universities seeking to align service innovation with income generation, international branding, and enhanced student experience.

H. Findings

The thematic analysis, complemented by institutional records, revealed that UTM's visa management transformation was achieved through a structured portfolio of strategic initiatives designed to improve efficiency, compliance, and stakeholder experience. These initiatives collectively illustrate how administrative reform can evolve into a strategic business model that enhances institutional competitiveness and supports Malaysia's vision as an international education hub.

1. Institutional Efficiency through Process Optimization

The findings reveal that institutional efficiency and process optimization have been central to UTM International's transformation in visa management. The Visa Unit has systematically embedded standardized operational procedures for visa approval, renewal, and cancellation, aligning its processes with national regulatory frameworks and international service benchmarks. Verification mechanisms with Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and the Malaysian Immigration Department (JIM) have been clearly defined to ensure procedural accuracy, policy compliance, and reduced turnaround time.

Regular monthly Online Visa Clinics and quarterly coordination meetings have institutionalized a feedback-driven governance ecosystem that enables continuous process review and real-time issue resolution. These engagement platforms also serve as compliance checkpoints, ensuring that all operational procedures adhere to evolving immigration policies while maintaining a customer-centered service approach.

In parallel, UTM International has prioritized staff upskilling and professional capacity building to sustain this transformation. Targeted training sessions, policy familiarization workshops, and collaborative exercises with EMGS and JIM have improved staff competency and decision-making confidence. The emphasis on regulatory literacy and intercultural communication has elevated service consistency, minimized procedural errors, and reinforced accountability across the department.

Beyond internal improvements, UTM International operates within an ecosystem of institutional oversight and inter-university coordination. The department contributes actively to the Jawatankuasa Pengarah Pengantarabangsaan (JKPA), a national forum comprising international directors from Malaysian public universities. This committee convenes regularly to discuss policy harmonization, share best practices, and align local procedures with global standards of internationalization. UTM's International Director, appointed as one of the chairing representatives at the national and regional levels, plays a key role in influencing strategic decisions that impact the national higher education brand. The university's leadership and representation within JKPA have not only enhanced the visibility of UTM's international operations but have also positioned the institution as a thought leader in visa management excellence and policy alignment.

Through these interconnected mechanisms—policy compliance, staff development, and governance through JKPA—UTM International has established a balanced and accountable operational ecosystem. This structure ensures internal check-and-balance, promotes consistency across units, and maintains alignment with global standards in visa management processes and service delivery. Collectively, these efforts have contributed to

improved efficiency, reduced administrative error, and strengthened institutional branding as a reliable, student-focused global university.

2. Digital Transformation and Data-Driven Innovation

Digital innovation has emerged as a core pillar in UTM International's transformation strategy, reinforced through the development of the International Management System (IMS 2.0). Unlike the national EMGS platform, which manages only selected visa stages, IMS 2.0 was built internally by UTM programmers to support end-to-end university-level processes, including visa tracking, document verification, student data management, appointment scheduling, and automated reminders. This system enables UTM to manage internal workflows with greater autonomy, speed, and accuracy, allowing the university to respond efficiently to administrative tasks that EMGS does not cater for. The planned Statistical Dashboard and Data Analytics Module for monitoring visa trends further highlights UTM's shift toward evidence-based institutional decision-making.

In close collaboration with UTM Digital, the central unit responsible for developing and managing the university's integrated digital ecosystem, UTM International has expanded a comprehensive digital infrastructure tailored to international student needs. This partnership utilizes the university's enterprise data systems to design user-centered digital platforms that streamline the visa process. The enhanced automation in application verification has significantly accelerated processing times, reduced human error, and improved overall service quality. These innovations collectively demonstrate how digital transformation strengthens the university's competitive position and enhances the overall experience of international students. Digital alerts for passport expiry and real-time compliance reminders ("Stay compliant—avoid overstaying") embedded in official email signatures serve as preventive governance measures. These digital strategies illustrate the alignment of UTM's administrative functions with its broader digital transformation agenda under the university's institutional blueprint.

3. Staff Competency, Responsiveness, and Stakeholder Engagement

The findings also indicate that staff competency development and stakeholder engagement have been central to the success of UTM International's transformation. Continuous professional training, benchmarking visits, and structured policy awareness sessions have significantly enhanced operational coherence across different institutional units. These initiatives were conducted in collaboration with multiple key stakeholders, including the External and Global Engagement (EGE) Committee, the Faculties, the Student Recruitment and Admission Division (SRAD), and the Bursar's Office, which manages payment services through the PayHub system. Engagement also extended to UTMSPACE, which oversees international students in the bridging category, as well as faculty-based international offices responsible for both undergraduate and postgraduate students in the main academic programs.

Through this collaborative structure, the university has established a comprehensive support ecosystem for international students across categories and programs. The participation of visa agents and finance officers in these sessions fostered a more integrated understanding of student visa processes, documentation flow, and financial transactions related to visa applications. This cross-unit engagement has built stronger communication channels and a shared sense of accountability among all stakeholders involved in managing the student visa lifecycle.

The International Student and Scholar Services (I3S) unit has demonstrated proactive leadership by coordinating regular briefings during the International Student Orientation Programme (ISOP) and conducting expert dialogue sessions with Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and the Malaysian Immigration Department (JIM). These platforms ensured that policy updates, procedural changes, and compliance expectations were consistently communicated to both staff and students. This holistic approach to stakeholder engagement has not only strengthened institutional governance but also enhanced service quality and customer experience, aligning with the broader strategic goal of positioning UTM as a globally competitive university.

These initiatives cultivated a professional service culture emphasizing empathy, courtesy, and intercultural understanding. Such human-centered approaches are consistent with literature identifying staff responsiveness as a critical determinant of international student satisfaction and institutional loyalty [4].

4. Policy Alignment and Strategic Compliance

UTM International's strength in policy alignment and regulatory compliance represents a major institutional milestone. The Visa Unit has consistently reviewed and updated policies related to fines, student insurance, and dependent visa regulations to ensure full conformity with Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and Malaysian Immigration Department (JIM) standards. Unlike many universities that do not impose fines, UTM adopts a structured compliance-based fine policy aimed at encouraging responsibility and fostering awareness among students about visa obligations. This approach functions as a preventive measure that reinforces accountability rather than a punitive system.

Collaborative consultations with the Bendahari UTM, Student Recruitment and Admission Division (SRAD), and faculty deans ensure coherent implementation across all operational levels. The integration of payment through the PayHub digital platform enhances transparency and traceability, strengthening financial and procedural governance.

In parallel, benchmarking with other Malaysian public universities enables UTM International to continuously evaluate and refine its policy practices. This ongoing comparative assessment ensures that the university's visa management system aligns with global standards of compliance and integrity. Through these strategic efforts, UTM International has positioned itself as a reference model of regulatory excellence, demonstrating that compliance can serve as a cornerstone of institutional credibility, international branding, and stakeholder trust.

Nevertheless, an additional operational issue highlighted in this study concerns the i-Kad, a physical identification card required for every international student, with a mandatory fee of RM10 per application. Although designed as an official student identity document, the findings show that students generally do not find the i-Kad useful. In actual enforcement practice, both immigration and police authorities rely primarily on the passport and valid visa sticker during random or targeted checks, rather than the i-Kad. The card merely stores insurance information already captured in existing systems, resulting in duplication rather than added value. Participants suggested that this requirement would be more effective if the i-Kad data were integrated into the existing visa or student-pass database instead of being maintained as a separate process. This highlights a misalignment between policy intention and practical function, and underscores the need for streamlined, interoperable systems to improve efficiency and student experience.

5. Value Creation, Branding, and Income Diversification

UTM International successfully translated administrative transformation into institutional value creation. The introduction of visa administrative fee reviews, consultative services, and digital payment integration (PayHub kiosk) diversified income streams while improving convenience for users. Initiatives such as the I3S Blazer branding project and infrastructure enhancements like the covered walkway to S19 reinforced UTM International's professional identity and visibility among global partners.

Events such as the Iftar with Strategic Partners and Embassy Engagement Visits strengthened diplomatic ties, enhancing Malaysia's reputation as a welcoming academic destination. These efforts exemplify how service innovation and stakeholder branding can transform an administrative function into a strategic business pillar.

6. Strategic Integration Toward Study Objective

Collectively, these findings confirm that UTM International's Visa Unit has achieved the study's objective—to demonstrate how visa management can evolve from a compliance function into a strategic driver of university competitiveness. Through process optimization, digital innovation, stakeholder engagement, and branding initiatives, the department now operates as a customer-centric, performance-driven unit that generates tangible value for both students and the institution.

This transformation illustrates a replicable model for Malaysian universities seeking to enhance global competitiveness through administrative innovation. UTM's experience affirms that well-designed visa and immigration services, when strategically aligned with institutional goals, can serve as powerful catalysts for financial sustainability, student satisfaction, and international reputation.

J. DISCUSSION

As referred to Figure 1, Table 1, 2, and 3 below, between 1 January and 19 November 2025, UTM International recorded a total of 3,821 international applications, with 3,816 submissions completed through the online platform, reflecting a 99.87% digital adoption rate. This dataset provides a quantifiable indicator of the effectiveness of UTM International's digital transformation initiatives, particularly the optimization of the International Management System (IMS 2.0), UTM's internally developed platform that supports visa stages and data processes managed exclusively by the university.

Table 1 Monthly application of visa by international students

Indicator	Value
Total Applications Received	3,821
Online Submissions	3,816
Digital Adoption Rate	99.87%
Reporting Period	1 Jan – 19 Nov 2025

The high online-submission rate demonstrates strong global user confidence in the university's digital ecosystem, signalling that applicants experience minimal friction during the initial engagement stage. This aligns directly with the study's objective of examining how operational modernization in visa and mobility services contributes to institutional competitiveness. The data suggests that UTM's improvements in system usability, automated communication, and centralized document processing have created a streamlined and accessible application environment that appeals to international applicants.

Table 2 Monthly Statistical Indicator of visa by international students

Statistical Indicator (Jan–Nov 2025)	Research Interpretation
3,821 applications received	Indicates strong global demand and sustained interest in UTM.
3,816 online submissions	Confirms high usability and accessibility of digital systems.
99.87% digital adoption	Demonstrates successful digital transformation and user trust.
5 non-online submissions	Represents minimal exceptions requiring manual handling.
Period: 1 Jan – 19 Nov 2025	Supports study timeframe for competitiveness analysis.

Table 3 Implication for UTM on application of visa by international students

Transformation Theme	Evidence from Application Data	Implication for UTM
Digital Transformation	99.87% submissions via online platform	Confirms strong implementation of IMS 2.0 and automated workflows.
Service Innovation	High application volume	Demonstrates improved service quality and user experience.
Compliance & Governance	Consistent online documentation flow	Supports EMGS/JIM alignment and reduces compliance risks.
Institutional Branding	Sustained demand from global applicants	Visa services indirectly strengthen UTM's international reputation.

Furthermore, the sustained volume of applications during the reporting period indicates a positive correlation between service innovation and institutional attractiveness. As highlighted earlier on digital transformation policy alignment, and enhanced staff responsiveness, UTM International has built a service infrastructure that supports efficiency, compliance, and positive applicant experience. The application statistics thus serve as empirical validation that visa and mobility services have evolved into a strategic driver of visibility, competitiveness, and global engagement for the university.

Although the findings offer valuable insight into UTM's strategic transformation, this study is bounded by several methodological limitations. The qualitative design, while allowing for deep contextual interpretation, does not capture quantitative performance indicators such as visa turnaround time, customer satisfaction scores, error-rate reduction, or financial benefits derived from administrative innovation. Additionally, because the study focuses on a single institutional context, the applicability of its findings may differ for universities operating under alternative governance structures or digital capacities. While the study highlights the significance of IMS 2.0, it does not empirically evaluate the platform's technical scalability, cybersecurity safeguards, or long-term sustainability. These limitations suggest the need for further quantitative and cross-institutional validation to broaden the generalizability of the model.

Furthermore, although the application data validates the strength of UTM's digital submission ecosystem, additional quantitative indicators; such as changes in processing time, renewal efficiency, or customer satisfaction, were beyond the scope of this study. Incorporating these metrics in future work would provide more empirical grounding to complement the qualitative insights presented here.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) transformed its visa and mobility services from a compliance-based administrative function into a strategic, digitally enabled system that enhances institutional competitiveness. The findings show that UTM International has significantly improved process efficiency, regulatory alignment, and user experience through structured governance and digitalisation. A key milestone in this transformation is the development of IMS 2.0, UTM's internally built student database and visa-processing system designed by in-house programmers to support end-to-end processes handled exclusively by UTM—particularly areas not catered for by the national EMGS system. The exceptionally high 99.87% online submission rate reflects the reliability of these internal digital tools and the effectiveness of improved communication and documentation protocols, addressing long-standing issues such as delayed submissions, incomplete documents, and improper student entry into Malaysia.

Overall, the transformation of visa services at UTM has evolved into a value-creating institutional asset that strengthens student satisfaction, operational excellence, and global visibility. By integrating IMS 2.0, data-driven governance, and student-centred service design, UTM International demonstrates how administrative functions can become strategic enablers of institutional performance and internationalisation. The university's experience illustrates a replicable model for higher education institutions seeking to enhance their international service ecosystem through internal system development and process innovation. Future work may further examine quantitative impacts, the expansion of IMS 2.0 capabilities, and cross-institutional benchmarking to advance best practices in international student service delivery.

Future research should employ mixed-method approaches such as time-motion analysis, satisfaction metrics, and financial evaluation to better quantify the impact of administrative transformation. Comparative benchmarking with other universities, deeper examination of IMS 2.0's technical integration with EMGS/JIM, and broader stakeholder inclusion—including alumni, rejected applicants, and private partners—would further enhance the study's relevance and system-wide insight.

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