Administrative Determinants of International Student Attraction in Malaysian Universities

Oshaghilashkariani Amirreza*ᵃ, Alireza Mohammadi ᵇ

ᵃ *City University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, amir.oshaghi1993@gmail.com*
ᵇ *City University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, alireza.mohammadi@city.edu.my*
* *Oshaghilashkariani Amirreza*

ABSTRACT

The globalisation of higher education has intensified competition among host countries and universities to attract international students, particularly within emerging education hubs such as Malaysia. While prior studies have predominantly emphasised academic reputation, cost, and cultural factors, the role of *administrative determinants* in shaping international student attraction remains conceptually underdeveloped. Addressing this gap, this paper develops a comprehensive conceptual framework that synthesises key administrative determinants influencing international students' enrolment decisions in Malaysian universities. Drawing upon Push–Pull Theory, Institutional Theory, and Service Quality perspectives, the study identifies critical administrative dimensions, including admission and application processes, visa and immigration facilitation, administrative communication and responsiveness, international student support services, and the digitalisation of administrative systems. The paper argues that administrative efficiency and service quality function as strategic pull factors by reducing uncertainty, enhancing institutional trust, and improving the overall student experience throughout the pre-arrival and enrolment journey. By contextualising these determinants within Malaysia's higher-education internationalisation agenda, this study highlights the strategic alignment between institutional administrative capabilities and national policy objectives. Conceptually, the paper contributes to the international education literature by repositioning administrative functions from peripheral operational roles to core strategic assets that enhance institutional competitiveness. Practically, it offers insights for university administrators and policymakers to strengthen administrative excellence as a sustainable competitive advantage in attracting international students. The paper concludes by outlining directions for future empirical research to validate the proposed framework across institutional and cross-country contexts.

KEYWORDS: international student attraction, administrative determinants, higher education internationalization, service quality, Malaysian universities

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has transformed higher education into a competitive international marketplace in which universities and national systems actively vie for internationally mobile students as sources of talent, research capacity, and economic value. Recent global indicators show sustained growth and high concentration of internationally mobile students at advanced levels of study, reinforcing that student recruitment is increasingly strategic and policy-driven rather than incidental (OECD, 2023; OECD, 2024). In parallel, UNESCO reports a continuing expansion of global higher-education participation and outward mobility, heightening competition among destination countries to differentiate not only through academic reputation but also through end-to-end student experience infrastructure (UNESCO, 2025).

Within this landscape, Malaysia has positioned itself as a regional education hub, supported by national higher-education planning and a deliberate internationalisation agenda. Official ministry communications highlight Malaysia's commitment to strengthening international cooperation, reducing barriers in higher education, and advancing national objectives aligned with "regional and global education hub" aspirations (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia [MOHE], 2024). Complementing this, Malaysia's higher-education administration ecosystem includes the Department of Higher Education's internationalisation function and related policy initiatives intended to support inbound mobility and system-level coordination (Department of Higher Education Malaysia, 2025). At an operational level, Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) under the purview of MOHE functions as the country's "official gateway" and one-stop centre for international student services, including the vetting, screening, and facilitation of student visa processes and international student support services (Education Malaysia Global Services [EMGS], 2024).

Despite these strategic ambitions and branding efforts, persistent administrative barriers can still shape international students' destination choices. First, visa and immigration processes remain salient because delays, uncertainty, and documentation complexity increase perceived risk and can deter enrolment even when academic programmes are attractive; contemporary research syntheses on international student experiences consistently identify visa-related issues as a common and consequential challenge across host countries (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Second, admission and enrolment systems including application transparency, processing time, and communication responsiveness affect the earliest stages of decision-making, where students form impressions of institutional reliability and service quality (Pawar et al., 2024). Third, student services coordination (e.g., international office support, arrival support, document verification, and post-arrival administrative help) influences adjustment experiences and satisfaction, which in turn can affect enrolment follow-through, word-of-mouth, and institutional attractiveness over time (EMGS, 2024; Pawar et al., 2024). Importantly, administrative perspectives and the administrative "frontline" role in shaping international student outcomes remain comparatively under-examined in parts of the internationalisation literature, suggesting a conceptual gap around how administrative systems operate as determinants of attraction and choice (Makino, 2024).

Accordingly, the problem statement guiding this paper is that: *despite strong branding and academic offerings, administrative determinants of international student attraction in Malaysian universities remain under-theorised and insufficiently integrated into a coherent explanatory model.* Many studies emphasise macro pull factors (country image, cost, safety, reputation) and institutional academic attributes, but the administrative domain is often treated as background "support" rather than a strategic determinant shaping perceived feasibility, trust, and service expectations during the pre-arrival and enrolment journey (Makino, 2024; Oduwaye et al., 2023).

Therefore, the research objective of this conceptual paper is to conceptualise the key administrative determinants influencing international student attraction in Malaysian universities by systematically organising the administrative factors most likely to shape students' choice and enrolment decisions. The paper's contribution is to integrate fragmented administrative factors into a unified conceptual framework that clarifies (i) which administrative determinants matter most (e.g., visa facilitation, admissions and enrolment efficiency, responsiveness, and service coordination), and (ii) how these determinants theoretically link to attraction outcomes (e.g., perceived institutional trust, perceived service quality, and reduced decision uncertainty). Such a framework aims to support both scholarly refinement of internationalisation theory and practical institutional improvements aligned with Malaysia's education hub aspirations (Department of Higher Education Malaysia, 2025; MOHE, 2024).

II. Literature Review

A. International Student Attraction

In the context of higher education internationalisation, international student attraction refers to a multi-stage decision-making process through which students identify, evaluate, and ultimately select a foreign higher education institution for enrolment. Rather than a single event, attraction is conceptualised as a progression encompassing institutional choice, intention to enrol, and actual enrolment behaviour. Recent systematic reviews of student enrolment literature emphasise that enrolment decisions emerge from an interaction between institutional characteristics, perceived value, and the quality of the pre-enrolment experience, particularly in competitive international education markets (Li et al., 2024).

The push-pull theory remains one of the most widely adopted frameworks for explaining international student mobility and attraction. Push factors originate from the students' home countries and include limited educational opportunities, perceived inadequacies in academic infrastructure, or socio-economic constraints. Pull factors, by contrast, are attributes of the host country and institution that actively attract students, such as reputation, cost advantages, employability prospects, and institutional support structures. Recent empirical evidence suggests that while macro-level pull factors such as national reputation remain influential, institution-level factors particularly administrative efficiency and service delivery play an increasingly decisive role in shaping students' final enrolment choices (Ke et al., 2022).

Complementing the push-pull framework, the service-quality perspective conceptualises international student attraction as a function of students' perceptions of the quality and reliability of institutional services. From this perspective, international students are viewed as informed decision-makers who evaluate universities not only on academic merit but also on the professionalism, responsiveness, and accessibility of their administrative systems. Studies conducted within the Malaysian higher education context demonstrate that service-quality dimensions such as communication clarity, courtesy, responsiveness, and ease of access significantly influence international students' perceptions of institutional attractiveness and trustworthiness (Amzat et al., 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant in the pre-arrival phase, where students rely heavily on administrative interactions to assess institutional credibility and readiness to support their transition.

B. Administrative Determinants in Higher Education

Within higher education literature, administrative determinants refer to the institutional structures, processes, and service mechanisms through which universities manage student-related operations and interactions. These determinants encompass admission procedures, documentation handling, visa and immigration coordination, communication systems, digital platforms, and student support services. Conceptually, administrative determinants are distinct from academic determinants, yet both jointly influence students' overall evaluation of a university.

Academic factors typically relate to the core educational mission of universities, including programme quality, curriculum relevance, teaching expertise, research output, and academic reputation. These factors have long dominated discussions on international student choice and institutional competitiveness. However, recent scholarship increasingly acknowledges that academic excellence alone is insufficient to attract and retain international students, particularly in contexts where multiple institutions offer comparable academic credentials (Li et al., 2024).

In contrast, administrative and institutional support factors concern how effectively a university facilitates students' educational journeys, especially during the critical pre-arrival and early adjustment phases. Empirical studies on international student experiences in Malaysian higher education institutions highlight that administrative support such as efficient admissions processing, clear communication, visa facilitation, and structured orientation plays a crucial role in shaping students' initial satisfaction and institutional commitment (Syed Ahmad & Loke, 2022). These findings underscore the role of administration as a strategic rather than merely operational function.

Importantly, administration often constitutes the first point of institutional contact for international students. Initial interactions typically occur through admission enquiries, application submissions, offer letters, and immigration-related documentation. In Malaysia, this role is further institutionalised by the national governance structure for international student mobility, whereby higher education institutions are directly involved in the submission and management of student pass applications through the Malaysian Immigration Department and

Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS). Consequently, the quality of administrative coordination and communication during these early stages becomes a powerful signal of institutional competence and reliability.

From a service-quality standpoint, administrative determinants function as tangible indicators through which international students infer the university's commitment to student welfare and organisational professionalism. High-quality administrative services reduce uncertainty, enhance perceived institutional trust, and facilitate smoother transitions into the host country's education system. Conversely, administrative inefficiencies may undermine even highly reputable academic offerings by increasing perceived risk and dissatisfaction. In the Malaysian context, recent evidence confirms that service-quality dimensions embedded within administrative practices such as responsiveness and courtesy are among the strongest predictors of international student attraction and retention (Amzat et al., 2023).

Overall, administrative determinants should be understood not as peripheral support mechanisms, but as core strategic assets that shape international students' perceptions, intentions, and enrolment decisions. This conceptual distinction provides a critical foundation for examining how administrative excellence contributes to Malaysia's aspiration to remain a competitive international education hub.

C. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding international student attraction requires a robust theoretical grounding that explains not only why students choose particular destinations and institutions, but also how institutional processes shape these decisions. This study anchors its conceptual framework in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Push–Pull Theory, Institutional Theory, and Service Quality Theory. Together, these theories provide a multi-level explanation of the role of administrative determinants in influencing international students' enrolment decisions, particularly within the Malaysian higher education context.

Push-Pull Theory has long served as a dominant framework for analysing international student mobility. The theory posits that students' decisions are shaped by a combination of push factors originating in their home countries and pull factors associated with host destinations and institutions. While early applications of the theory emphasised macro-level drivers such as economic conditions, political stability, and educational capacity, recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the importance of institution-level pull factors that directly affect students' decision confidence and perceived feasibility of studying abroad (Nikou, 2024; Yuan et al., 2025). In this regard, administrative efficiency has emerged as a critical yet underexplored pull factor. Empirical studies conducted in Asian higher education contexts, including Malaysia, demonstrate that transparent admission procedures, timely processing, and effective visa facilitation significantly influence students' destination choices (Abd Aziz et al., 2025). From a push–pull perspective, administrative determinants function as attraction mechanisms by reducing uncertainty, transaction costs, and perceived risk during the pre-enrolment phase, thereby strengthening the overall pull of Malaysian universities.

While Push-Pull Theory explains the motivational logic underlying student choice, it does not fully account for how administrative processes acquire meaning and credibility in the eyes of international students. Institutional Theory addresses this limitation by emphasising the role of legitimacy, standardisation, and compliance in shaping organisational behaviour and stakeholder perceptions. Contemporary institutional scholarship argues that organisations are evaluated not solely on performance outcomes, but also on their adherence to socially accepted rules, norms, and professional standards (Meyer, 2025). In higher education, administrative systems such as admission governance structures, documentation protocols, quality assurance mechanisms, and immigration coordination serve as visible indicators of institutional legitimacy. Recent studies highlight that accreditation, regulatory compliance, and standardised administrative routines enhance stakeholder trust and institutional credibility, particularly in cross-border education settings where information asymmetry is high (Iqbal, 2025; Alhajri, 2025). For international students, who often lack direct experiential knowledge of host institutions, administrative legitimacy becomes a proxy for reliability and organisational competence. Accordingly, Institutional Theory provides a strong justification for conceptualising administrative standardisation and compliance as strategic determinants of international student attraction rather than merely operational necessities.

Complementing these macro- and meso-level explanations, Service Quality Theory offers a micro-level lens through which international students' evaluations of administrative performance can be understood. Rooted in the SERVQUAL and SERVPERF models, Service Quality Theory posits that service users form perceptions based on dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Recent higher education research confirms that these dimensions are particularly salient in administrative encounters, including admissions communication, international office services, and problem-resolution processes (Wider et al., 2024). Studies focusing explicitly on international students reveal that administrative service quality significantly shapes satisfaction, trust, and behavioural intentions, including enrolment and institutional recommendation (Öktem & Çiftçi, 2024; Seitova et al., 2024). In this sense, administrative determinants operate as service-quality signals through which universities convey professionalism, care, and organisational effectiveness. High responsiveness in communication, reliable information provision, and assurance in handling complex procedures collectively enhance perceived service quality and strengthen students' attraction to an institution.

The integration of Push-Pull Theory, Institutional Theory, and Service Quality Theory offers a holistic and theoretically coherent foundation for the present conceptual framework. Push-Pull Theory explains why administrative determinants matter by positioning them as pull factors that enhance institutional attractiveness. Institutional Theory explains how administrative systems generate credibility through legitimacy and standardisation, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. Service Quality Theory explains through what mechanism administrative performance influences attraction by shaping students' perceptions of service quality and institutional reliability. By synthesising these perspectives, the study advances a multi-theoretical understanding of international student attraction in which administrative determinants are conceptualised as strategic, legitimacy-enhancing, and perception-shaping drivers of enrolment decisions. This integrated

theoretical foundation supports the argument that administrative excellence is central to Malaysia's ambition to position itself as a competitive and trusted destination for international higher education.

D. Administrative Determinants

The attraction of international students has increasingly become a strategic priority for higher education institutions, particularly in countries positioning themselves as regional education hubs such as Malaysia. While prior research has extensively examined academic reputation, ranking, cost, and cultural factors, administrative determinants remain comparatively underexplored despite their critical role in shaping students' early and ongoing institutional experiences. Administrative processes often constitute the first and most frequent points of interaction between prospective international students and universities, thereby influencing perceptions of institutional quality, reliability, and trustworthiness. This section conceptually reviews key administrative determinants that are theorised to influence international student attraction.

1) Admission and Application Processes

Admission and application processes represent the initial institutional gateway through which international students engage with universities. Transparent procedures, clear documentation requirements, and predictable processing timelines reduce informational asymmetry and uncertainty, which are particularly salient for students navigating cross-border education decisions. From a service-quality perspective, clarity and transparency signal institutional reliability, while processing efficiency reflects responsiveness both of which are central to students' evaluations of organisational competence.

Recent studies emphasise that perceived service quality within higher education institutions significantly shapes students' satisfaction, trust, and behavioural intentions, including choice and recommendation (Seitova et al., 2024; Wider et al., 2024). In the context of international student mobility, application systems that are confusing, slow, or inconsistent may deter prospective students, even when academic offerings are strong. Conversely, streamlined online application platforms, clear communication of entry requirements, and timely feedback enhance institutional credibility and attractiveness.

Research focusing on international student choice in Malaysia further indicates that institutional and operational attributes function as important pull factors alongside broader destination characteristics (Abd Aziz, 2025). These findings support the conceptual view that admission processes are not merely administrative formalities but strategic instruments that influence student attraction by shaping early perceptions of institutional professionalism and service orientation.

2) Visa and Immigration Support

Visa and immigration procedures constitute a critical administrative determinant unique to international students, as enrolment is contingent upon successful regulatory approval. In Malaysia, student mobility is governed by structured immigration requirements that necessitate coordination between universities and national agencies such as Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) and the Immigration Department. As such,

institutional capability in facilitating visa applications, providing accurate guidance, and coordinating documentation becomes a decisive factor in students' enrolment decisions.

Existing literature suggests that uncertainty surrounding visa approval, documentation errors, and prolonged processing times heighten perceived risk and anxiety among prospective students (Sarker, 2025). Universities that provide structured pre-arrival guidance, dedicated visa officers, and transparent tracking mechanisms are better positioned to mitigate these concerns. Moreover, institutional support in navigating immigration procedures signals organisational competence and care, reinforcing students' confidence in the institution.

Policy-oriented analyses of Malaysia's international education ecosystem increasingly frame visa facilitation as an integral component of service delivery rather than a purely regulatory function (Education Malaysia Global Services, 2021). Accordingly, visa and immigration support can be conceptualised as a strategic administrative determinant that directly shapes the feasibility and attractiveness of international study.

3) Administrative Communication and Responsiveness

Effective administrative communication is fundamental to international student attraction, particularly in the pre-enrolment phase where interactions are predominantly virtual. Response time, accuracy of information, consistency across departments, and availability of multilingual support collectively shape students' perceptions of institutional reliability. Delayed or inconsistent communication may undermine trust and create doubts regarding administrative competence.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that international students' satisfaction with administrative services is strongly influenced by responsiveness and clarity of communication, especially when addressing enquiries related to admissions, visas, and programme requirements (Öktem, 2024). Service-quality research further underscores responsiveness and reliability as core dimensions influencing satisfaction and loyalty in higher education contexts (Seitova et al., 2024).

For international students, administrative communication often serves as a proxy for overall institutional quality due to limited opportunities for in-person engagement prior to arrival. Consequently, universities that demonstrate timely, accurate, and culturally sensitive communication are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy and student-centred, enhancing their attractiveness in a competitive global education market.

4) International Student Support Services

Beyond entry and enrolment processes, the availability and quality of international student support services play a vital role in shaping institutional attractiveness. Orientation programmes, international offices, and formal complaint-handling mechanisms assist students in navigating academic, social, and administrative challenges, thereby reducing adjustment costs and perceived risk associated with studying abroad.

Recent research indicates that comprehensive institutional support systems significantly influence international students' satisfaction and their intention to recommend the institution to others, indirectly reinforcing student attraction through reputational effects (Sarker, 2025). Moreover, studies highlight the

importance of coordinated administrative structures in addressing international students' unique needs, including academic advising, welfare support, and grievance resolution (Seitova et al., 2024).

In conceptual terms, international student support services function as assurance mechanisms that signal institutional preparedness and commitment to student wellbeing. Universities that institutionalise robust support structures are therefore more likely to attract international students by presenting themselves as safe, inclusive, and professionally managed environments.

5) Digitalisation of Administrative Services

Digitalisation has transformed administrative service delivery in higher education, reshaping how institutions interact with international students across the student lifecycle. Online portals, e-payment systems, and real-time document tracking enhance convenience, transparency, and efficiency, which are particularly valuable for students managing processes remotely from abroad.

Recent scholarship on higher education digitalisation emphasises that digital infrastructures increasingly shape institutional competitiveness and stakeholder experiences (Komljenovic, 2025). From the student perspective, digitalised administrative services facilitate self-service, reduce bureaucratic friction, and enhance perceptions of institutional modernity and efficiency (Potocan et al., 2025). In Malaysia, digital platforms supporting application submission, visa tracking, and administrative communication further exemplify how digitalisation integrates with internationalisation strategies.

Conceptually, digitalisation acts as an enabling administrative determinant that strengthens institutional attractiveness by reducing uncertainty, improving service accessibility, and signalling organisational innovation. As international students increasingly compare institutions on the basis of operational convenience and digital readiness, administrative digitalisation becomes a salient factor in attraction decisions.

III. METHODOLOGY

In the context of international student mobility, existing studies have predominantly emphasised academic reputation, rankings, and marketing-related pull factors. However, administrative determinants—such as admissions processes, visa facilitation, responsiveness, and student support services—remain comparatively under-theorised despite their critical role in shaping prospective students' early institutional experiences. Accordingly, the proposed framework integrates administrative determinants as the primary explanatory construct, with international student attraction as the outcome variable, while incorporating perceived institutional trust and service quality perception as key explanatory mechanisms.

The proposed conceptual framework positions administrative determinants as the independent variable and international student attraction as the dependent variable. Administrative determinants refer to non-academic institutional processes and administrative service functions that prospective international students encounter throughout the pre-arrival and enrolment stages. These include the efficiency and transparency of admissions

procedures, visa and immigration support, clarity of information, responsiveness of administrative staff, and the availability of international student services. Prior research suggests that such administrative encounters significantly shape students' perceptions of institutional reliability and professionalism, particularly in cross-border education contexts where uncertainty and perceived risk are high (Amzat, 2023).

International student attraction is conceptualised as the institution's capacity to convert prospective international students into applicants and enrolled students. This construct encompasses students' attraction-related outcomes, such as application intention, enrolment decision, and willingness to select a particular institution over competing alternatives. In line with push–pull theory, administrative effectiveness functions as an institutional pull factor that enhances the perceived attractiveness of the host university (Chang et al., 2021).

To strengthen the explanatory power of the framework, two mediating constructs are incorporated: perceived service quality and perceived institutional trust. Perceived service quality reflects international students' overall evaluation of administrative service performance, particularly in terms of responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy. Studies in higher education service research consistently demonstrate that administrative service quality plays a decisive role in shaping students' satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Amoako, 2023). Perceived institutional trust refers to students' belief that the university is competent, dependable, and committed to acting in students' best interests. Trust is especially salient in international education decisions due to financial, legal, and relocation risks, and it has been shown to mediate the relationship between service encounters and favourable behavioural outcomes (Tessema, 2024).

The conceptual framework proposes that administrative determinants exert both direct and indirect effects on international student attraction. First, administrative determinants are expected to positively influence perceived service quality. Administrative services constitute a core component of the higher education service delivery system, and efficient admissions procedures, clear communication, and timely administrative responses signal professionalism and service competence. When administrative processes function effectively, international students are more likely to evaluate the institution's overall service quality positively (Amoako, 2023; Rizos, 2022).

Second, administrative determinants are posited to positively influence perceived institutional trust. Administrative interactions often represent the first sustained point of contact between international students and the host institution, preceding academic engagement. Consistency of information, reliability of administrative commitments, and supportive handling of visa and documentation matters contribute to perceptions of institutional credibility and integrity. Prior research in higher education services indicates that such administrative reliability fosters trust, which in turn reduces uncertainty associated with international study decisions (Tessema, 2024).

Third, perceived service quality is proposed to positively influence international student attraction. Universities that deliver high-quality administrative services are more likely to be perceived as student-oriented and dependable, enhancing students' willingness to proceed with application and enrolment. Empirical evidence

demonstrates that service quality perceptions are closely associated with positive behavioural outcomes, including intention formation and institutional choice (Amoako, 2023; Mendoza-Villafaina et al., 2024).

Fourth, perceived institutional trust is expected to positively influence international student attraction. Trust functions as a risk-reducing mechanism in international education decisions, particularly where students must commit significant financial resources and navigate unfamiliar regulatory environments. Institutions perceived as trustworthy are therefore more likely to attract international students, as trust enhances confidence in administrative promises and long-term institutional support (Tessema, 2024).

Taken together, the framework proposes a mediated relationship in which administrative determinants influence international student attraction indirectly through perceived service quality and perceived institutional trust. These mediators may operate in parallel, reflecting distinct yet complementary psychological mechanisms through which administrative performance translates into attraction outcomes. This mediation logic aligns with contemporary higher education service research, which emphasises the role of service-related perceptions and trust in shaping student decision-making (Amzat, 2023; Tessema, 2024).

IV. Discussion and Conclussion

First, this conceptualisation extends internationalisation research beyond marketing and rankings by foregrounding administration as part of the "infrastructure" that enables (or constrains) international student mobility. Recent internationalisation scholarship emphasises that contemporary higher education internationalisation is shaped by competition, policy rationales, and governance complexities, not only by promotional positioning. In this sense, administrative determinants (e.g., admissions processing, visa facilitation, service responsiveness) function as institutional mechanisms through which national and institutional rationales for internationalisation are operationalised. This aligns with evidence that internationalisation is increasingly entangled with socio-economic and political rationales at the policy level, which must be translated into workable institutional processes to be experienced by students.

Second, the framework positions administration as a strategic asset, rather than a back-office function. Marketing-oriented approaches can attract attention, but student attraction is also shaped by institutional reliability and system performance the "delivery" side of internationalisation. This complements recent critiques that market-driven internationalisation strategies may be insufficient or unsustainable if they neglect quality and institutional systems that support the international student experience. In parallel, research on higher-education service quality shows that service processes and staff responsiveness influence student evaluations and satisfaction supporting the argument that administrative performance contributes to perceived institutional credibility and attractiveness.

Third, this conceptual paper strengthens theory-building by bridging *international student choice* research with administrative determinants. For example, evidence from Malaysia indicates that international students' enrolment decisions are shaped by host-country policy conditions and institutional attributes (e.g., perceived

institutional reliability and broader policy environment), implying that administrative determinants can be theorised as part of the policy–institution interface influencing attraction. Furthermore, an administrative lens adds explanatory power because international student support is not only "what universities offer," but also how administrative actors coordinate, prioritise, and implement support practices a perspective often under-emphasised in international student research.

University management (strategic governance). University leaders should treat international student administration as a strategic capability (e.g., processing speed, service consistency, cross-unit coordination), because these administrative touchpoints shape perceived trustworthiness and "ease of entry" into the institution. Service-quality evidence suggests that improving service delivery can strengthen student satisfaction and institutional outcomes, reinforcing the managerial need to resource and monitor administrative performance (e.g., response-time KPIs, quality audits, integrated student-service workflows).

International offices (operational execution). International offices are positioned as the coordinating hub of international student support, but research shows support work is shaped by administrative perspectives and interdepartmental coordination. This implies a need for clearer service charters, multilingual communication protocols, and escalation pathways for complex cases (e.g., immigration documentation, late arrivals, compliance checks). Strengthening coordination across faculties, registry, finance, and student affairs reduces "handoff friction" that international students often experience.

Policy makers (MOHE, EMGS) and system facilitation. At the national level, the policy implication is that internationalisation targets require efficient system infrastructure especially visa and student-pass processes. Official Malaysian sources indicate that EMGS is the principal body facilitating international student movement and visa processing, and immigration guidance explicitly links student pass applications (particularly for private HEIs) to the EMGS system. Therefore, policy enhancements can focus on process transparency, predictable timelines, and integrated information systems between HEIs, EMGS, and immigration operations so that administrative efficiency becomes a competitive advantage for Malaysia's education-hub ambitions.

E. Future Research Directions

Future research is therefore encouraged to adopt robust and complementary methodological approaches that enhance predictive accuracy, contextual generalisability, and temporal depth. In particular, four methodological directions are proposed: Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), mixed methods research, cross-country comparative designs within ASEAN, and longitudinal student decision tracking.

First, future studies may empirically validate the proposed conceptual framework using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate for theory development and prediction-oriented research, especially when examining complex relationships among latent constructs and when data distribution assumptions are not strictly met (Hair et al., 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2022). Given that administrative determinants such as admission efficiency, visa facilitation, and service responsiveness are

multidimensional and potentially formative in nature, PLS-SEM offers methodological flexibility in modelling both reflective and formative measurement structures. Moreover, recent methodological literature emphasises the importance of assessing measurement invariance prior to conducting subgroup analyses, particularly when comparing perceptions across student demographics or institutional types (Liengaard et al., 2024). Accordingly, future empirical work may employ PLS-SEM not only to test structural relationships but also to assess predictive relevance and group-level differences in international student attraction.

Second, mixed methods research designs offer a valuable avenue for extending the explanatory power of the proposed model. Administrative processes are experienced subjectively by international students through interactions, procedures, and institutional touchpoints, which may not be fully captured through survey instruments alone. Integrating qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or document analysis with quantitative modelling enables researchers to triangulate findings and enrich theoretical interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). For instance, qualitative insights can be used to refine measurement items, uncover context-specific administrative barriers, and explain unexpected statistical relationships identified through PLS-SEM. This approach is particularly appropriate in higher education research, where institutional practices and student experiences are deeply embedded within socio-cultural and regulatory contexts.

Third, future studies may enhance external validity through cross-country comparative analysis, particularly within the ASEAN region. Malaysia's ambition to position itself as a regional education hub necessitates comparative understanding of how administrative determinants operate relative to neighbouring destinations such as Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, or Vietnam. Prior research on student mobility in Southeast Asia indicates that administrative efficiency, regulatory clarity, and institutional coordination vary substantially across national systems (Koh, 2025; ASEAN, 2022). Cross-country designs would enable scholars to examine whether the proposed relationships are context-specific or structurally consistent across higher education systems. Methodologically, such studies should prioritise measurement equivalence and invariance testing to ensure valid comparisons across national samples (Cheah et al., 2023; Liengaard et al., 2024).

Finally, future research should consider longitudinal designs to capture international student attraction as a dynamic decision-making process rather than a single point-in-time outcome. International student decisions typically unfold across multiple stages, including information search, application submission, visa processing, pre-arrival preparation, and final enrolment confirmation. Longitudinal tracking of student perceptions across these stages would allow researchers to examine how administrative experiences evolve over time and how early interactions influence later commitment decisions (Hao et al., 2024). Such designs may involve panel surveys, multi-wave data collection, or cohort tracking aligned with the international student journey. Longitudinal approaches are increasingly advocated in higher education research to improve causal inference and better reflect the temporal nature of student choice behaviour.

Collectively, these methodological directions provide a rigorous agenda for advancing research on administrative determinants of international student attraction. By combining predictive modelling, qualitative

depth, comparative breadth, and temporal sensitivity, future studies can move beyond conceptual development toward robust empirical evidence that informs theory, institutional practice, and policy formulation in the internationalisation of higher education.

F. Conclusion

This conceptual paper advances the international student attraction literature by foregrounding *administrative determinants* admissions processing, visa facilitation, responsiveness of student-facing offices, and the digitalisation of administrative services as strategic "pull" mechanisms that shape how international students evaluate Malaysian universities beyond academic reputation and cost considerations. In doing so, the paper consolidates fragmented discussions on internationalisation and student choice into an integrated view where administrative capability functions as a measurable institutional asset that can strengthen perceived reliability and reduce uncertainty in the enrolment journey. This positioning complements evidence that international student decisions in Malaysia are influenced not only by university attributes but also by host-country policy and institutional systems that enable smoother entry and onboarding.

The framework is directly relevant to Malaysia's higher-education strategy because internationalisation in Malaysia is strongly shaped by system-level governance, policy coordination, and institutional practices that must be operationalised at the university level. In particular, the student visa ecosystem and the Student Pass process implemented through coordinated institutional submissions and national-level procedures illustrate how administrative alignment can affect destination attractiveness through perceived efficiency and transparency. When universities execute these requirements with high service quality (clear instructions, timely communication, reliable document handling, and real-time support), administrative interactions become part of the "Malaysia education experience" that influences student attraction and confidence.

Overall, the paper concludes that *administrative excellence is a competitive advantage* in the global higher-education market: universities that invest in end-to-end administrative efficiency and digitally enabled services can improve the student experience, lower transaction costs (time, uncertainty, repeated documentation), and strengthen institutional trust thereby enhancing international student attraction and supporting Malaysia's ambition to remain a preferred regional study destination. In this sense, administrative determinants should be treated not as routine back-office functions, but as strategic capabilities that can differentiate Malaysian universities in an increasingly competitive international education landscape.

REFERENCES

Abd Aziz, N., Ahmed, S., Haque, R., Qazi, S. Z., & Senathirajah, A. R. B. S. (2025). Deciphering international students' choices: Push-pull dynamics and necessary condition analysis in Malaysian university selection. International Journal of Knowledge Management.

Alhajri, H. M. (2025). The role of accreditation in enhancing good governance of higher education institutions: Evidence from stakeholder and legitimacy perspectives. Higher Education Governance & Policy, 4(1), 1–15.

Amoako, G. K. (2023). Service quality affecting student satisfaction in higher education: A comparative study. *Cogent Education, 10*(1), 2238468. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2238468

Amzat, I. H., et al. (2023). Determining service quality indicators to recruit and retain international students in Malaysia higher education institutions: Global issues and local challenges. Sustainability, 15(8), 6643. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15086643

Andreeva, A., Kuyumdjiev, I., & Dimitrova, D. (2022). Digital administrative services provided by higher education institutions to students Challenges and good practices of UE–Varna. In *15 Years of Administrative Justice in Bulgaria Problems and Perspectives* (pp. 111–122). University of Economics – Varna. https://doi.org/10.36997/PPDD2022.111

Carmo, J. E. S., Lacerda, D. P., Klingenberg, C. O., & Piran, F. A. S. (2025). Digital transformation in the management of higher education institutions. *Sustainable Futures, 9*, 100692. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sftr.2025.100692

Chang, D. F., Yang, H., & Chen, S. (2021). Institutional mediation of push–pull factors on international student satisfaction. Sustainability, 13(20), 11405. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011405

Cheah, J.-H., Thurasamy, R., Memon, M. A., Chuah, F., & Ting, H. (2023). Multigroup analysis using partial least squares structural equation modeling: A systematic review and recommendations. *Journal of Business Research, 156*, 113479. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113479

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2023). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Da Wan, C., & Abdullah, D. (2021). Internationalisation of Malaysian higher education: Policies, practices and the SDGs. *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development, 23*(3), 212–226. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCED-08-2020-0052

Department of Higher Education Malaysia. (2025, November 21). Internationalisation of higher education. Jabatan Pendidikan Tinggi (JPT), Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi.

Education Malaysia Global Services. (2024). EMGS sustainability report (FY2024).

Education Malaysia Global Services. (n.d.). *A closer look at Malaysia's student visa process*. Retrieved January 31, 2026, from https://educationmalaysia.gov.my/blogs/a-closer-look-at-malaysia%E2%80%99s-student-visa-process

Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2022). *A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Hao, Y., Guo, Y., & Yan, Z. (2024). International students' experiences and outcomes: A systematic review and future research agenda. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development.* https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2418477

Iqbal, T. (2025). The mediating role of academic accreditation in quality assurance: An institutional theory perspective. SAGE Open, 15(1), 1–12.

Immigration Department of Malaysia. (n.d.). *Student pass.* Retrieved January 31, 2026, from https://www.imi.gov.my/index.php/en/main-services/pass/student-pass/

Ke, H., Junfeng, D., & Xiaojing, L. (2022). International students' university choice to study abroad in higher education and influencing factors analysis. Frontiers in Psychology, 13, 1036569. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1036569

Komljenovic, J. (2025). Digitalised higher education: Key developments, questions, and concerns. Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 46(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2024.2408397

Koh, S. Y. (2025). Regional student mobility to Malaysia: Contributing factors, trends and issues. *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 90.

Li, Y., Singh, C. K. S. S., Luo, J., Wong, W. L., & Shen, D. (2024). A systematic literature review of university student enrolment from 2020 to 2023. Asian Journal of University Education, 20(1). https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v20i1.25699

Liengaard, B. D., Sharma, P. N., Hult, G. T. M., Hair, J. F., & Sarstedt, M. (2024). Measurement invariance testing in partial least squares structural equation modeling. *Journal of Business Research, 170*, 114314. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114314

Makino, N. (2024). Administrative perspectives on international student support (Master's thesis). DIVA Portal.

Mendoza-Villafaina, J., et al. (2024). Educational experience, university satisfaction and drivers linked to attracting new students. *International Journal of Educational Research, 125*, 102297. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102297

Meyer, K. E. (2025). Organizational legitimacy as a core concept for theorizing organizations and environments. Journal of World Business, 60(2), 101–118.

Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. (2024, March 25). ASEAN (Malaysia)–China higher education forum and HSK "Study in China" education & career expo 2024 (speech text).

Nikou, S. (2024). The push–pull factor model and its implications for the internationalisation of higher education. Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning, 14(1), 76–90.

Oduwaye, O., Thompson, A., & Alabi, O. (2023). A trend analysis of the challenges of international students. SAGE Open, 13(4).

OECD. (2023). Education at a glance 2023: OECD indicators. OECD Publishing.

OECD. (2024). International student mobility. OECD.

Öktem, M. K., & Çiftçi, L. (2024). International students' satisfaction perception of administrative services: Evidence from higher education. Journal of International Students, 14(2), 455–472.

Pawar, S. K., Jain, M., & colleagues. (2024). International student support service components that add value: Evidence from higher education. Cogent Education.

Potocan, V., Mulej, M., & Nedelko, Z. (2025). Digitalisation of higher education: Students' perspectives. Education Sciences, 15(7), 847. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070847

Rizos, S. (2022). Quality of administrative services in higher education. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics, 31*(3), 402–417.

Sarstedt, M., Ringle, C. M., & Hair, J. F. (2022). Partial least squares structural equation modeling. In C. Homburg et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of market research*. Springer.

Sarker, M. (2025). International students' satisfaction with institutional support systems. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 17(5), 1–18.

Seitova, M., Tokhirov, R., & Karimova, D. (2024). Perceived service quality and student satisfaction in higher education. Frontiers in Education, 9, 1492432. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1492432

Syed Ahmad, S. B. B., & Loke, S. H. (2022). Unfolding the moving-in experiences of international students at a Malaysian private tertiary institution. Asian Journal of University Education, 18(2). https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v18i2.18001

UNESCO. (2025, June 24). Record number of higher education students highlights global need for recognition of qualifications. UNESCO.

Tessema, D. H. (2024). The mediating role of brand trust and student satisfaction in higher education service quality relationships. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*. Advance online publication.

ASEAN. (2022). *The state of higher education in Southeast Asia*. ASEAN Secretariat.

Wider, W., Tan, Y. P., & Lim, K. H. (2024). Service quality measurement in higher education: A SERVQUAL-based bibliometric analysis. Heliyon, 10(3), e21456.

Yuan, X., Li, J., & Chen, Y. (2025). International student motivations and experiences: A push–pull theory review. Journal of International Education Research, 21(1), 33–49.