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**Being Mega And Becoming International: Opportunities And Challenges for
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)**

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Abstract

UiTM2025 provides a future priorities framework by explicitly stating that UiTM is highly committed to establishing a world-class research platform for global performance by providing impactful portfolios on translational research, high-impact publications, creative and smart innovations, and partnerships with stakeholders. However, the design and implementation of international activity set out in UiTM2025 does not mean that the University has adequate capacity to address global issues, thereby undermining its international positioning and outlook. Against the historical account of the development of the UiTM, qualitatively, this paper evaluates and found evolution, opportunities, and challenges are closely associated with UiTM's international positioning.

Keywords: UiTM; UiTM2025; world class university; global

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1.0 Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education has evolved in different directions over the past 30 to 40 years, from a marginal aspect to a key aspect of the reform agenda. In that process, universities have always had international dimensions in their research, teaching, and service to society. However, those measurements were generally characterised by being ad hoc, fragmented, and implicit rather than explicit (de Wit & Merckx, 2012). Based on respective summaries of the public discourse and of research in that domain (see Teichler, 1996, 2004; Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Teichler, 2010), this paper aims to argue that six key meanings of "internationality" or

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“internationalisation” of higher education are most widely applicable to UiTM: (1) Worldwide/border-crossing knowledge transfer (books, other media, etc.), (2) Physical mobility across countries (students, academic staff, administrative staff, etc.), (3) International cooperation and communication (between countries, institutions of higher education, individual scholars, etc.), (4) International education and research (comparative approaches, intercultural learning, socialisation for international understanding, etc.), (5) International similarity (convergence, globalisation, Europeanization, etc.) and, (6) International reputation (“world-class universities”, “international quality”, etc.).

According to de Wit and Deca (2020), some of the main trends in internationalisation in the past 30 years have been more focused on internationalisation abroad than on internationalisation at home: (1) Characterised by greater ad hoc, fragmented, and peripheral approaches, as opposed to being strategic, comprehensive, and central within policies, (2) Focused on a limited, privileged subset of students and faculty, with insufficient emphasis on global and intercultural outcomes for all, leading to a lack of inclusivity and equity, (3) Driven by a constantly shifting array of political, economic, socio-cultural, and educational reasons, increasingly prioritising economic motivations, (4) Influenced by national, regional, and global rankings to an escalating degree, (5) Exhibiting minimal alignment between the international aspects of the three core functions of higher education: education, research, and societal engagement, (6) Primarily a strategic choice and emphasis of higher education institutions, but also increasingly prioritised by national governments (geared toward soft power, reputation, and/or revenue) and regions (such as the European Union, Bologna signatory countries, ASEAN), and (7) Emulating already established models, primarily championed by influential entities with substantial economic influence and traditions in higher education advancement, such as the UK, USA, France, Germany, etc.

For UiTM, the global transformation journey began in 2021. UiTM aims to become a globally renowned University by 2025. In addition to that, in the strategic blueprint UiTM2025, three (3) strategic thrusts were outlined – quality education, global excellence, and value-driven performance (UiTM 2025 Strategic Plan):

(1) Quality education - while efficiency is about doing or achieving more with less, education is a challenge to maximise the full potential of new or emerging technologies. If UiTM can leverage human adaptability to re-strategise global strategy, then UiTM can simultaneously elevate networking through technology. Therefore, as country leaders think about investing in technology, they should first think about investing in education for the people who can maximise those tools and solutions.

(2) Global excellence - as the saying goes – is the only constant thing, which is change. However, change is much more likely to happen if UiTM drives it from the top down. In the context of global networking, the main implication is that UiTM cannot expect the glory of University prominence unless UiTM nurtures a global mindset to begin with.

(3) Value-driven performance - Just as quality education and global excellence are critical global transformation puzzles, value-driven performance such as communication, teamwork, collaboration, leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving are must-haves in the global age. To keep UiTM at the forefront, it is crucial to establish the right balance between a globally minded community and those with strong value-driven performance.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 UiTM sets for the future

UiTM is aspiring to become a globally renowned university. To do this, UiTM put up an overarching priority, which is to enhance its global presence further. UiTM operates on an international stage, and this must be reflected in all areas of university life, from students and staff to collaborations that tackle problems transcending national boundaries and in the important intellectual and societal contributions UiTM makes. But if UiTM is successful, UiTM will see clear benefits in terms of having vibrant, internationally focused staff and students who are open to and working with the best minds worldwide. UiTM will have recruited students today who will be the international leaders of tomorrow.

Changing progressively, UiTM now has four clusters of Colleges, 13 Faculties, and 14 Centres of Excellence, offering comprehensive academic programmes ranging from undergraduates, postgraduates, and professional degrees. From a humble beginning as a technical institution back in 1956, UiTM evolved as a college institution and eventually as a full-fledged university in 1996. UiTM is currently building its reputation to be recognised as one of the top echelon universities in the world based on the QS World's Best University Ranking. This will change the nature of its international partnerships. UiTM has officially signed with nearly 800 partner universities worldwide, including elite universities, i.e., Imperial College, Curtin University, National Tsing Hua University, and universities with outstanding rankings by subjects. Nevertheless, the gap in these collaborations has skewed towards Asian partners. This evolution requires UiTM to evaluate the ideal portfolio of partners and how the University organises its international activities. All these have so far impacted UiTM strategically. UiTM gets more and more clarity to increase partners that would build on its visibility. This means that enhancing the presence on the global stage may require UiTM to move more boldly to link beyond the Asian region while strengthening our Asian partnerships (Gratton & Jones, 2023; Amey & Eddy, 2023) with universities in China, India, and Southeast Asia.

3.0 Methodology

The research summary offered in this paper concentrates on the qualitative research method and focuses on the two major parts of the research method, which are the data collection procedure and data analysis. The validity of the research results was ensured by stressing the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the

situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. This approach has been used by many authors (Lind, 2001; Marginson, 2002; Hopper & Major, 2007; Lukka, 2007; Vaivio & Sirén, 2010). Constraints on data collection and analysis resulted, however, in limitations to the study were overcome by the first researcher's own experience and engagement – as the Director of UiTM Global, who has direct contact with the people, situation, and phenomenon under investigation; the researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Opportunities associated with Internationalisation

UiTM has moved up progressively in its terrain of development through trials and tribulations, the latest being global enough. What transpires is that universities all over are in full gear towards becoming a global entity. To keep abreast with global transformation, UiTM must stay updated and fit the requirements of being a global University. More relevant nowadays is that the post-pandemic scenario has forced universities past the tipping point. This was generally acknowledged by management at many universities all over the world. Key leaders of UiTM share their sentiments that universities should not work in isolation. They need to collaborate with their partners the world over to address issues of global concern (D'Adamo & Gastaldi, 2023). This may ultimately include criteria before a university must entail, such as the board comprised of imminent scholars who are from diverse nationalities, staff, and students alike. Still, UiTM, a glaringly affirmative university, in its ambition to become a world-class University, must preserve its identity and unique mission at its core to elevate the destiny of the indigenous community towards a balanced growth socio-economically for Malaysia as a prosperous nation.

UiTM researchers are now involved in many international research programmes, such as Erasmus KA1, Erasmus KA2, and Horizon 2020, and student and staff mobility programmes. In this regard, it is also crucial for UiTM to improve faculty support services and the research ecosystem to enhance faculty and staff productivity, research, and retention and to integrate research to enable active learning and innovation. At the same time, more UiTM researchers should be encouraged and supported to venture into high-impact and cutting-edge research across the entire frontier of knowledge so that UiTM will be at the forefront as one of the effective solution providers for industry and community.

Some benefits of effective strategic partnerships include providing access to technology, R&D resources, research funding, IP rights, commercialisation of ideas, and equity in new enterprises. It could also benefit universities and industry by bringing visibility, credibility, and prestige to an initiative through the association. They can also lead to new publications and increased exposure. One example is the prominence of research through global networking, which determines UiTM's standing in the academic world. Research prominence can be elevated by increasing and improving university impact through high peer-reviewed publications, recognised scholarly books and creative activities, and knowledge translation and innovation. In addition, increasing research funding for research enterprises is critical, and this can be provided by identifying sustainable funding sources for research and increasing faculty external grant applications. Respondents also agreed that it is crucial to improve faculty support services and the research ecosystem to enhance faculty and staff productivity, research, and retention and to integrate research to enable active learning and innovation. Furthermore, UiTM researchers should be encouraged and supported to venture into high-impact and cutting-edge research across the entire frontier of knowledge so that UiTM will be at the forefront as one of the effective solution providers for industry and community.

The rise of a global knowledge economy has intensified the need for strategic partnerships that go beyond the traditional funding of discrete research projects. UiTM realises that university-university, university-industry, and university-government partnerships are necessary to push the frontiers of knowledge, and these alliances become a powerful engine for innovation and economic growth. However, respondents believed that UiTM needs to be tactful and certain about the clarity of synergies from any strategic alliance it enters.

4.2 Challenges associated with Internationalisation

Some main challenges in pursuing the internationalisation of UiTM derived from the interviews, among others:

- (1) UiTM has identified that there are 6 main risk categories registered under UiTM's eRMS: Electronic Risk Management System – one of which is Strategic Risk. Within the domain of Strategic Risks, there are 9 more clusters, i.e. Less preferred University of Choice, Weak Value Proposition, Lack of Research Prominence, and Unimpactful Partnerships and Alliances.
- (2) The inability of Faculties to establish international networking with elite Universities, listed in the top 300 QS World Ranking and Top 300 QS World Ranking by Subjects - Statistics between 2001-2019 show that Malaysia's top three international collaborations are England, USA, and Australia. Joint publications with China and India are also visible. Those from Japan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are among the top collaborators, producing 5,000 or more joint publications. In the context of ASEAN partners, Joint Publications with Collaborating Countries 2012-16 is lacking; Only Indonesia is in the top 10.
- (3) Incoming student mobility - The incomparable grading system is a glaring issue for student mobility. The credit system has still not been fully adopted in Malaysia, which impedes the transfer of credits. The nature of the curricula, which do not meet international standards, also represents a real difficulty.
- (4) Being accorded an affirmative university status by its Act, UiTM is still subject to the same legislation and regulations as any other university, including the same parameters for global ranking assessment.

- (5) The absence of infrastructure, especially regarding university residences, is a problem. International students find it difficult to live on campus, forcing them to rent off-campus accommodation. There are problems with the services offered at the university level, as not all institutions have an international office with well-informed staff.
- (6) The financial management of funds for research projects, particularly regarding tightened budgets, is the call for being more transparent and self-generating; for instance, the purchase of equipment involves high degrees of bureaucracy and requires the payment of taxes that impede international research collaboration.
- (7) Despite having a good command of English, there is an obvious lack of competency in human capital, including support staff who are rather 'inwardly oriented' to embrace the new mode of working and dealing with international partners.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, certainly, many can relate to the view that addressing these issues and gaps in our current global initiatives involves creating stronger and more fruitful partnerships between various stakeholders to provide the necessary tools to prepare university communities for the ever-shifting needs of the new economy.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Collaboration between universities – within countries as well as across borders – is no longer optional.

Currently, UiTM is witnessing a digital transformation that is more than just about technology – it is about having both machines and humans co-existing to realise the possibilities for efficiency gains and making a global impact. A case in point - notice that at this current time, UiTM gets more and more queries as well as networking visits from universities in the developing world about partnerships that would build on our growing knowledge of management in those regions. Enhancing our understanding of Asia may require us to set up local research partnerships with universities in the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa region – not just in the European or North American region.

A truly global university must address global issues. Whether it is food security or energy sustainability, whether it is the threat of climate change or the realities of mass migration, the challenges UiTM faces are international – and so, too, will be the solutions. Infectious diseases are not bothered by borders. Regardless of whether UiTM is in Shah Alam or elsewhere, UiTM is all affected by the pace of digital transformation.

Still, a global university should educate its students to become global citizens and prepare them for global careers. It covers a wide array of challenges, from certification and accreditation to the more straightforward end and through to ensuring that the curriculum includes international problems and to the teaching of the much more complex soft or transferable skills that a global citizen must possess. Therefore, it is important to have inter-university networking to drive and encourage global collaboration and to ensure present and future workforces are kept abreast with the needs of mankind today and tomorrow.

Hence, the realisation of the dream of producing a global university does not come easily, and so does Malaysia. It is not also sufficient for a country to spend huge sums of money to push some of its universities to global university status. Other actions should be taken, in tandem, to support the aspiration of being a globally renowned University.

5.2 UiTM Global with the mission

UiTM was initially created as a technical training centre to provide Bumiputera (indigenous) students with wide access to higher education. Otherwise, they cannot be due to the general backwardness. One can argue that our original driver was to address the inter-ethnic socio-economic discrepancies. The university charted into a partnership with quite several foreign partners for twinning programmes and has developed over the last six decades more than 800 partnership agreements. On top of that, we organise international internships and academic missions. All this led to the result that UiTM's ranking was improving, particularly the program has had significant long-term results for early-career faculty participants, leading to ongoing and long-term collaborations, joint grant proposals, invitations to visit the senior scholars' campuses, the development of wide collegial networks, and publications. One very senior Faculty Dean explained, "I just can't say enough about a few researchers that drive and inspire others regardless of the small amount of money it takes to make a huge impact on the individual faculty member and the University as a whole."

The risks of not embracing this agenda are severe: In this dynamic, exciting, and challenging world, to stand still to make incremental progress will be to fall behind. Therefore, UiTM must understand that strategy sets out how UiTM proposes to build on that strong international tradition and reputation to ensure that UiTM is best positioned to contribute and thrive in the years ahead. Given the ever-increasing pace of change globally, UiTM needs to be able to act quickly and flexibly. UiTM needs to give a sharp international focus to our considerable and broad-ranging strengths in research, learning, and knowledge exchange – identifying and making the most of emerging international opportunities; communicating effectively internally and externally about the range of our international activity; and continuously improving how UiTM go about the range of our international work.

That much UiTM knows. UiTM is trying to make sense of this together, and UiTM knows how, which is by having good partners - talking to each other, listening to each other, and trying to learn from each other. The Department of Strategic Partnerships (DSP) underscores a part of the vital functions at the Assistant Vice Chancellor's Global Office. DSP is committed to enhancing the internationalisation of the University by establishing a strategic international network and partnership for the University. UiTM aspires to be a globally renowned university of science, technology, humanities, and entrepreneurship; thus, it realises the fundamental need to adopt systems and practices that are globally prominent and have significant global relevance.

With confidence, creativity, and strategic collaboration, DSP aims to undertake its mission of internationalisation and its analytic ability together with other abundant intellectual capital resources in leveraging international activity to realise UiTM's aspiration as a globally renowned University.

Noting that the international network of UiTM covers most regions of the world to support and leverage opportunities for global partnerships, DSP engages State Campuses, Faculties, Centres of Excellence (CoEs), departments, and other internal units of the University in establishing international partnerships, the design and implementation of international activity that meets aims set out in the University's Strategic Plan. The Office is anchored in the Assistant Vice-Chancellor's Global and with oversight from the Director. To become a globally renowned university, UiTM must deliver unmatched value proposition to its stakeholders. In this respect, UiTM must be relevant in meeting the needs and expectations and deliver the benefits that will enrich and enhance the quality of life of society through its activities. UiTM, as an established brand, must continue to demonstrate what it can offer stakeholders that no other competitor can and how its products and services fulfil a need that no other competitor can fill. Effective value proposition will enhance UiTM's reputation and make it easier to attract more 'customers' in the future. Key areas of concern include the global ranking and visibility of UiTM as an institution that can attract quality students and staff, quality services, and the ability to produce reputable and well-equipped graduates who are in demand and versatile.

Live and breathe the tagline, transforming the ripples into tidal waves, underscores the need to lead the development of agile, professional Bumiputeras through state-of-the-art curricular and impactful research to address global issues, thereby embracing the international positioning and outlook. A global university requires the capacity to harness the power of strategic partnership and attract global intellectual capacity (Newman, 2023) to attain global status and have international appeal, which is a great potential for universities to tackle the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

As the largest comprehensive university in Malaysia, UiTM has expanded its visibility through collaborations with universities worldwide. It continues to provide access to higher education, playing its role in nation-building by Unleashing Potential and shaping the Future. Universities, ever visible and useful, must be the new mantra for the entire academic community. UiTM is confident that this will provide a much greater level of access to knowledge sharing that is vital to addressing issues of global interest. In summary, in an increasingly connected world, UiTM is more ready than ever to pursue a strategy to go international as a long-drawn effort. It requires patience, and more research is necessary to examine how partners perceive, build trust, and take actions to assimilate and enrich their unique contributions to the pool of knowledge from around the globe, thereby making UiTM ever more globally visible.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper has placed the internationalisation agenda within the context of challenges and opportunities, briefly considered the status of UiTM as the largest public university in Malaysia and one of the mega universities in the world, and pointed towards how global environments might be considered in the future. Key elements for success with such environments have been suggested, and the paper will close by summarising the potential of UiTM in pursuing its internationalisation agenda.

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