

การเคลื่อนย้ายของนักศึกษาและการทำให้การอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทยเป็นสากล: สมรรถนะของสถาบันและพลวัตของประชากร

Student Mobility and the Internationalization of Higher Education in Thailand: Institutional Capacities and Population Dynamics

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์ว่าการกำกับดูแลด้านตรวจคนเข้าเมืองและความสามารถเชิงสถาบันของสถาบันอุดมศึกษาไทยมีอิทธิพลต่อประสบการณ์ การปฏิบัติตามกฎระเบียบ และระดับความพึงพอใจของนักศึกษาต่างชาติจากจีนและประเทศกลุ่ม CLMV ที่ศึกษาในประเทศไทยระหว่างปี 2023–2024 อย่างไร โดยใช้ข้อมูลitudinal ระหว่างปี 2020–2025 ถูกนำมาประกอบเพื่อให้เห็นบริบทแนวโน้มระดับชาติและระดับสถาบัน ขณะที่ข้อมูลปฐมภูมิที่รวบรวมระหว่างปี 2023–2024 ให้หลักฐานเชิงประจักษ์เกี่ยวกับประสบการณ์ของผู้เรียน

การวิจัยมีวัตถุประสงค์ 3 ประการ ได้แก่ (1) เปรียบเทียบกระบวนการจัดการวิชาของมหาวิทยาลัยวิจัย (มหาวิทยาลัยมหิดล และจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย) มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคล (มทร.) ทั้ง 9 แห่งและมหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏ และหลักสูตรเฉพาะทางในเครือข่าย มทร./ราชภัฏ (2) วิเคราะห์ผลของระบบดิจิทัล ความเป็นมืออาชีพของบุคลากร และความชัดเจนของการสื่อสารต่อการปฏิบัติตามกฎวิชาและระดับความเครียดของนักศึกษา และ (3) ระบุลักษณะของกลุ่มนักศึกษาที่มีความเสี่ยง เช่น นักศึกษาหญิง นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 และผู้เรียนในหลักสูตรระยะสั้น การวิจัยใช้ระเบียบวิธีแบบผสมผสาน Convergent Parallel โดยเก็บข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณจากนักศึกษาต่างชาติ 400 คน (สถาบันละ 100 คน) แบบสอบถามมาตร Likert มีความตรงเชิงเนื้อหาอยู่ระหว่าง $IOC = 0.67-1.00$ และค่าความเชื่อมั่นภายใน $\alpha = 0.84-0.91$ ส่วนข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพจากการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก 36 ราย และสนทนากลุ่ม 4 กลุ่ม ผู้วิจัยใช้การวิเคราะห์เชิงธีม (Thematic Analysis) ตามแนวทางของ Braun และ Clarke (2020: 328–352) ซึ่งเป็นแนวคิดแบบ Reflexive Thematic Analysis ที่มุ่งเน้นการตีความเชิงลึกและบทบาทเชิงสะท้อนคิดของผู้วิจัยในกระบวนการสร้างธีมจากข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพ

ผลการวิจัยพบว่าการพัฒนารูปแบบการกำกับดูแล การออกแบบโครงสร้างดิจิทัลที่เหมาะสมกับบริบทของแต่ละสถาบัน และการยกระดับทักษะบุคลากรอย่างต่อเนื่อง จะช่วยให้การจัดการด้านวิชาและการสนับสนุนนักศึกษาต่างชาติมีประสิทธิภาพมากยิ่งขึ้น และส่งผลดีต่อการสร้างความพึงพอใจและความน่าเชื่อถือของสถาบันในระยะยาว

คำสำคัญ: การเคลื่อนย้ายของนักศึกษาต่างชาติ วิชาประเภทเพื่อการศึกษา Non-Immigrant “ED”

ศักยภาพสถาบัน การกำกับดูแล นักศึกษาสัญชาติจีนกลุ่มประเทศ CLMV

Abstract

This study examines how immigration governance and the institutional capacities of Thai higher education institutions influence the experiences, regulatory compliance, and satisfaction levels of international students from China and CLMV countries studying in Thailand between 2023 and 2024. Secondary data from 2020–2025 are incorporated to illustrate national and institutional trends, while primary data collected during 2023–2024 provide empirical evidence on students lived experiences.

The research has three objectives: (1) to compare the visa management processes of research universities (Mahidol University and Chulalongkorn University), the nine Rajamangala University of Technology (RMUT) campuses, Rajabhat Universities, and specialized programs within the RMUT/Rajabhat network; (2) to analyze the effects of digital systems, staff professionalism, and communication clarity on students' visa compliance and stress levels; and (3) to identify characteristics of at-risk student groups, such as female students, first-year students, and learners in short-term programs. A Convergent Parallel mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 400 international students (100 per institution) using a Likert-scale questionnaire with content validity ranging from $IOC = 0.67$ – 1.00 and internal reliability $\alpha = 0.84$ – 0.91 . Qualitative data were obtained from 36 in-depth interviews and four focus groups. The researcher applied Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2020: 328–352) Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach, which emphasizes deep interpretation and the researcher's reflexive role in constructing themes from qualitative data.

The findings indicate that enhancing governance models, designing digital structures that align with the context of each institution, and continuously strengthening staff competencies can significantly improve visa management and support services for international students. These improvements also contribute to greater student satisfaction and reinforce institutional credibility in the long term.

Keywords: International student mobility, Non-Immigrant “ED” visa, Institutional capacity, Governance, Students of Chinese nationality and CLMV nationalities (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam)

Introduction

In the context of accelerating globalization, higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly become key sites where migration flows, knowledge exchange, and national competitiveness intersect. Thailand's ambition to position itself as a regional education hub has intensified in recent years; however, empirical research indicates that the realization of this goal is shaped significantly by the governance of international student mobility, particularly for students from China and the CLMV region (Nguyen & Chen, 2021: 61). Rather than functioning as a neutral administrative mechanism, the Non-Immigrant ED visa operates as a social structure that shapes demographic flows through procedural requirements such as initial applications, 90-day reporting, and annual renewals (Immigration Bureau, 2022: 5–6). Compliance with these regulations has proven uneven across institutional types. Flagship universities such as Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University have established centralized international offices, developed digital systems, and employed specialized staff, all of which enable

smoother administrative compliance. By contrast, institutions within the RMUT and Rajabhat networks continue to rely on fragmented processes and limited resources, exposing international students to delays, compliance risks, and heightened stress (Wongchai, 2023: 54–56).

A notable institutional distinction lies in the degree of collaboration with government agencies. Research-intensive universities such as Chulalongkorn and Mahidol have formal memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with the Immigration Bureau, allowing direct transmission and verification of international student data. This cooperation streamlines visa renewals, 90-day reporting, and legal status checks. Conversely, RMUT and Rajabhat institutions, which lack comparable partnerships, must navigate multiple layers of coordination, contributing to administrative delays and increased compliance risks for students.

Evidence collected between 2020 and 2025 further illustrates these disparities. A survey of 358 foreign students in Northeastern Thailand found that efficient immigration services significantly influenced student satisfaction and retention (Praphamontipong, P., & Chalamwong, Y. 2020: 110–125). Likewise, a mixed-methods study conducted in 2025 with 718 survey respondents and 25 interviews with Chinese students demonstrated that perceptions of Thailand's competitiveness as a study destination were closely tied to visa governance and institutional support structures (Zhong et al., 2025: 242–245). Additional findings from a survey of 900 Chinese students revealed disproportionate visa-related stress among female students, first-year students, and those enrolled in short-term programs (Wright & Schartner, 2020: 124–126).

The present study focuses on Chinese and CLMV students for three primary reasons. First, these two groups represent the largest demographic cohorts of international students in Thailand between 2020 and 2025 (Praphamontipong, P., & Chalamwong, Y. 2020: 110–125). Second, their mobility reflects distinct regional patterns: Chinese students commonly enter research universities through long-term degree programs, whereas CLMV students are concentrated in regional and technological institutions and often enroll in shorter or vocational courses. Third, both groups have been directly affected by immigration reforms—including the 2025 measures aimed at preventing misuse of ED visas and regulating short-term programs—demonstrating how demographic pressures shape policy responses (Nation Thailand, 2025, p. 2; Khaosod English, 2025: 4).

Policy reforms during this period also reflect a tightening of oversight and the increased securitization of educational migration. In 2023, digital innovations such as the e-Extension platform and online 90-day reporting were introduced to modernize immigration management (Immigration Bureau, 2023: 2–3; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023: 4). In 2025, MHESI and the Immigration Bureau implemented five new measures to regulate student visas and added stricter controls on non-degree programs, requiring minimum on-site attendance and enhanced institutional reporting (Nation Thailand, 2025: 2; Khaosod English, 2025: 4). Nevertheless, the adoption of these reforms has been uneven. Smaller universities with limited digital infrastructure have struggled to integrate the changes, thereby widening the gap between flagship and regional institutions.

Existing scholarship has tended to prioritize national-level policy discourse or the experiences of elite universities (Knight & de Wit, 2018: 2–4). Far less attention has been given to intra-national institutional inequalities and their demographic consequences for Chinese and CLMV students, particularly with respect to compliance, adaptation, and perceptions of host institutions (Nguyen & Chen, 2021: 61). Addressing this gap, the present study

compares four institutional cases: Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University, the Rajamangala University of Technology (RMUT) network, and the Rajabhat University system.

Against this backdrop, the study examines three central research questions:

1. How do research-intensive, technological, and regional universities operationalize student visa governance for Chinese and CLMV students?
2. Which institutional capacities and practices strengthen or hinder their ability to manage immigration services effectively?
3. What theoretical and policy insights emerge from these disparities for Thailand's efforts to develop as a regional education hub?

Drawing on policy documents, peer-reviewed research, and institutional data, this study employs three theoretical lenses grounded in social demography and migration studies: the Push-Pull framework to explain mobility dynamics; Social Network Theory to examine the role of institutional and community linkages; and intercultural adaptation models to understand student adjustment in varying institutional environments. By conceptualizing immigration governance as both a legal mechanism and a social structure, this study highlights how institutional disparities shape the relationship between state regulation and internationalization outcomes. These findings underscore the need for differentiated governance approaches that balance national security imperatives with inclusive, student-centered practices. Ultimately, addressing capacity gaps between flagship and regional universities is essential if Thailand aims to sustain its position as a credible regional hub for higher education and international student mobility.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Framework

Contemporary scholarship in social demography and migration studies offers several analytical tools for explaining the mobility and lived experiences of international students, particularly those from China and CLMV countries. Three core theoretical lenses—Push-Pull dynamics, Social Network Theory, and intercultural adaptation models—are especially relevant for understanding the Thai context.

The Push-Pull framework traditionally explains the macro-level motivations that drive students to study abroad (Lee, 1966: 47–57). For Chinese and CLMV students, push factors include limited university seats, rising tuition costs, or socioeconomic constraints at home, while pull factors include Thailand's geographical proximity, cultural familiarity, affordability, and perceived safety. In Thailand, however, these pull factors interact with a unique counter-pull: the complexity of ED visa procedures.

Social Network Theory also aligns strongly with the Thai setting (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011: 1168–1181). Across Chinese and CLMV student populations, mobility decisions and adaptation processes are shaped by relational structures—family members already in Thailand, alumni networks, cross-border ethnic communities, social media groups, and recruitment agents. In contexts where institutional capacity is weak, such as RMUT and Rajabhat institutions, students rely heavily on informal networks for guidance on immigration procedures and for

navigating bureaucratic ambiguity. Social Network Theory thus helps explain why students in resource–constrained institutions experience higher compliance risks and inconsistent information.

Intercultural adaptation models further illuminate how students respond to stressors within Thailand’s varied institutional environments (Bennett, 2013: 62–75; Zhang & Goodson, 2011: 281–292). Students enrolled in universities with robust support systems—orientation programs, legal advisory services, digital immigration platforms—tend to progress through adaptation stages more smoothly. Conversely, those in institutions with fragmented support must confront cultural barriers, unclear visa requirements, and limited administrative assistance, often resulting in greater psychological stress and reduced academic integration. These models highlight how demographic factors (e.g., gender, year of study, short-term enrollment) interact with institutional capacity to shape uneven adaptation trajectories.

Despite the relevance of these frameworks, no existing study explicitly conceptualizes the Non-Immigrant “ED” visa as a “social structure” that organizes demographic flows, produces differentiated forms of legal precarity, and stratifies student experiences across university types in Thailand. This theoretical omission represents a key contribution that the present study seeks to address.

2. Related Empirical Studies

Thai and regional scholarship over the past half-decade has increasingly examined the relationship between immigration governance and student mobility, particularly among Chinese and CLMV populations. Student visas, though formally administrative instruments, effectively determine who can access higher education across borders. In Thailand, the Non-Immigrant ED visa, anchored in the 1979 Immigration Act, dictates student entry and stay and imposes layered requirements such as 90-day reporting and annual renewals (Immigration Bureau, 2022: 5–6). Studies have shown that these regulations create administrative burdens for both institutions and students, challenging Thailand’s national narrative of being a regional education hub (Jampaklay, Penboon & Lucktong, 2022: 183–193).

Empirical findings between 2020 and 2025 highlight how governance frameworks shape student experiences. A survey of 358 international students in Northeastern Thailand demonstrated that visa service efficiency significantly influences satisfaction and retention (Praphamontripong, P., & Chalamwong, Y. 2020: 110–125). A mixed-methods study involving 718 participants and 25 interviews with Chinese students found that satisfaction with immigration services is strongly tied to perceptions of Thailand’s competitiveness as a study destination (Zhong et al., 2025: 242–245). These findings underscore that immigration procedures function not as passive bureaucratic processes but as demographic determinants that structure educational mobility.

At the institutional level, capacity differences significantly mediate student outcomes. Flagship universities such as Chulalongkorn and Mahidol have invested in centralized international offices, digital immigration systems, and legal advisory services, enabling smoother coordination with authorities. In contrast, RMUT and Rajabhat institutions rely on fragmented, paper-based processes that expose students to delays and higher compliance risks (Praphamontripong, P., & Chalamwong, Y. 2020: 110–125; Wongchai, 2023: 54–56). These structural

inequalities shape migration pathways, particularly for CLMV and Chinese students whose institutional choices align with their socioeconomic backgrounds.

A survey of 900 Chinese students revealed that women, first-year students, and short-term learners are disproportionately affected by visa-related stress (Wright & Schartner, 2020: 124–126). These studies reaffirm the value of integrating intercultural adaptation theory with analyses of institutional capacity.

Recent policy developments between 2020 and 2025 signal increasing digitization and securitization in Thai immigration systems. Initiatives such as the THAI E-VISA, the e-Extension platform, online 90-day reporting, and the Thailand Digital Arrival Card reflect a shift toward digital governance (Immigration Bureau, 2023: 2–3; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023: 4). Meanwhile, the 2025 introduction of five new regulatory measures for student visas—including mandatory onsite learning and enhanced reporting for non-degree programs—illustrates how demographic pressures drive policy tightening (Nation Thailand, 2025: 2; Khaosod English, 2025: 4). However, no study has examined how uneven institutional digitalization moderates the effects of these reforms.

3. Research Gap

Despite a growing body of research, several gaps remain:

3.1 Lack of conceptualization of ED Visa as a social structure

Although many studies discuss ED visa procedures, none explicitly theorize the ED visa as a social structure that generates stratified mobility outcomes, institutional inequalities, and differentiated experiences for Chinese and CLMV students.

3.2 Limited analysis of intra-national institutional disparities

Research often centers on elite institutions or national rhetoric about regional leadership. Few studies compare how research-intensive, technological, and regional universities operationalize immigration governance differently.

3.3 Insufficient attention to digital governance inequalities

With new tools such as e-Extension and TDAC, institutional differences in digital readiness are increasingly significant but remain understudied.

3.4 Lack of longitudinal demographic evidence

Most studies offer snapshots rather than examining how shifting immigration policies affect long-term student retention, stress trajectories, and adaptation patterns.

The literature demonstrates that immigration governance has become a central force shaping the demographic, institutional, and experiential realities of student mobility in Thailand. Yet significant gaps remain in understanding how the ED visa functions as a socio-demographic structure and how institutional capacity produces unequal outcomes across university types. By integrating Push–Pull theory, Social Network Theory, and intercultural adaptation models with empirical evidence from Thailand, this study advances a novel, theory-driven approach that situates visa governance at the core of international student mobility.

To synthesize the theoretical perspectives and research gaps identified above, the study develops a research framework that integrates institutional capacity, immigration governance, and student experience into

a coherent analytical model. This framework illustrates the relationships between the independent variables—digital system quality, staff professionalism, and communication clarity—and the dependent variable, the overall satisfaction of international students.

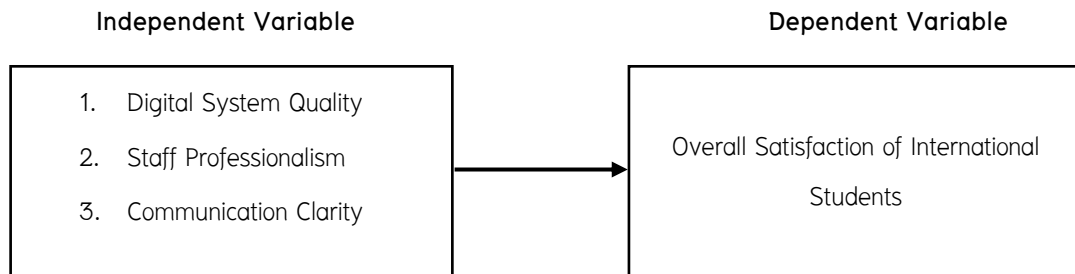


Figure 1: The Research Framework

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a Convergent Parallel Design, wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and subsequently integrated. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how institutional capacity within Thai higher education influences the experiences and satisfaction levels of international students from China and CLMV countries, reflecting both structural conditions and individual lived experiences. To contextualize these analyses, secondary data published between 2020 and 2025 were used to illustrate broader national and institutional trends, while primary data were collected directly from participants between 2023 and 2024.

The population for this study consisted of international students enrolled in 49 Thai higher education institutions, including two research-intensive universities (Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University), nine Rajamangala University of Technology (RMUT) campuses, and thirty-eight Rajabhat University campuses. A balanced sampling strategy was applied to the four institutional types, with 100 respondents drawn from each: Mahidol University, Chulalongkorn University, the RMUT network, and the Rajabhat University system—resulting in a total quantitative sample of 400 participants. This design ensures statistical stability in the ANOVA comparisons and minimizes bias arising from the unequal number of institutions across groups.

The qualitative component consisted of 60 participants, including 36 in-depth interviewees—12 university staff members (3 from each institutional type: Mahidol, Chulalongkorn, RMUT, and Rajabhat) and 24 international students (6 per institutional group). Additionally, four Focus Group Discussions were conducted with students from the four CLMV countries—Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam—each group consisting of 6 participants, totaling 24 students. All qualitative participants were required to hold a Non-Immigrant ED visa, have resided in Thailand for at least one academic term, and possess direct experience with visa reporting or the annual visa extension process, based on the established Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria.

Two main instruments were used: (1) a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire, and (2) semi-structured interview and focus group guides designed to capture the nuances of students' experiences regarding visa processes, clarity of institutional communication, staff professionalism, digital system readiness, and the emotional and psychological burdens encountered throughout immigration procedures.

1. Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire consisted of four major sections:

1.1 Demographic and background information, such as country of origin, gender, year of study, length of stay in Thailand, and institutional type.

1.2 Experience with visa compliance, including the ease or difficulty of completing the 90-day reporting requirement, clarity of documentation, and duration of the annual visa extension process.

1.3 Institutional capacity indicators, divided into three subscales:

1.3.1 Quality of digital systems, such as online appointment systems, notification services, and document-tracking platforms.

1.3.2 Staff professionalism, including accuracy of information, helpfulness, and readiness to assist international students.

1.3.3 Clarity of communication, including comprehensibility of announcements, procedural instructions, and consistency of information.

1.3.4 Overall satisfaction with the immigration service process, including perceptions of efficiency, transparency, timeliness, security, and overall service outcomes.

2. Instrument Validation (IOC / Try-out / Reliability)

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instruments, the following procedures were conducted:

2.1 Content Validity (IOC): The questionnaire items were reviewed by three experts in international education, student services, and research methodology. Item-by-item evaluation yielded IOC values ranging from 0.67 to 1.00, exceeding the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.50.

2.2 Try-out Testing: A pilot test was conducted with 30 international students holding ED visas (outside the main sample). Feedback was used to refine item clarity, questionnaire length, and appropriateness of the Likert options before field implementation.

2.3 Reliability Analysis: Cronbach's alpha coefficients demonstrated strong internal consistency across all subscales:

2.3.1 Digital System Quality = 0.89

2.3.2 Staff Professionalism = 0.86

2.3.3 Communication Clarity = 0.84

2.3.4 Overall Satisfaction = 0.91

All α values exceeded 0.80, indicating a high level of reliability appropriate for quantitative analysis.

Data collection was conducted using both online and offline questionnaires, in-person interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis of relevant immigration policies—including the e-Extension system, 90-day reporting procedures, and other regulatory frameworks implemented between 2023 and 2024. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, ANOVA, Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests, and Multiple Regression Analysis. Qualitative data were examined through Thematic Analysis, with methodological triangulation employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, Tukey HSD post-hoc tests, and multiple regression analysis.

3.2 Qualitative data were examined using Reflexive Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework (Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2020: 328–352).

3.3 Integration of quantitative and qualitative strands was conducted using a Convergent Parallel approach.

4. Confidentiality and Data Protection

The researcher affirms that all information obtained from participants—through questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions—will be securely stored and treated as strictly confidential. All personally identifiable information will be removed or anonymized prior to analysis, and no names, personal details, or identifying attributes will be disclosed in any part of the research report.

All data will be used solely for academic and research purposes and will not be shared with any external parties or agencies unrelated to this study. The researcher will implement appropriate data protection measures and adhere to ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Results

The findings of this study reveal how immigration governance, institutional capacity, and demographic characteristics intersect to shape the mobility and academic experiences of Chinese and CLMV students in Thailand between 2023 and 2024. Rather than functioning as neutral administrative procedures, the Non-Immigrant ED visa operates as a structuring mechanism influencing student trajectories, levels of security, and long-term educational stability. The following subsections elaborate the major themes aligned with the study's objectives regarding (1) institutional capacity, (2) visa governance, and (3) demographic vulnerability.

1. Institutional Inequalities and Governance Capacity

A central finding concerns the uneven capacities of Thai higher education institutions in handling student visa requirements. Research-intensive universities—most notably Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University—have developed centralized international offices, digitized reporting systems, and dedicated staff teams

that ensure strong alignment with immigration regulations. Consequently, students in these institutions tend to experience smoother administrative processes and report reduced anxiety and greater satisfaction. As one Mahidol student explained:

“The system reminds me of everything—I don’t worry about missing a step.” (Mahidol student, personal communication, January 12, 2023)

Mahidol University demonstrates strong organizational readiness due to its large international student population, which is distributed across every faculty. To manage this scale effectively, the university regularly engages in discussions, information exchanges, and ongoing coordination with the Immigration Office of Nakhon Pathom Province. Although a formal MOU has not yet been publicly confirmed, there is a clear trajectory toward establishing such an agreement, given the increasing number of international students and the growing need for structured, campus-wide immigration support.

A Mahidol administrator emphasized the importance of this close cooperation, noting how regular interaction with immigration officers facilitates smoother communication, improves service efficiency, and enhances the overall support provided to international students.

“Having immigration officers come to campus cuts the waiting time dramatically. Students feel supported and less stressed.” (Mahidol administrator, personal communication, April 20, 2023)

International students also expressed confidence in Mahidol’s administrative infrastructure:

“When the university coordinates directly with immigration, it feels like the system is designed to help us succeed.” (International student at Mahidol, personal communication, June 25, 2024)

Chulalongkorn University displays similar strengths. Owing to its large and diversified international student body, its International Affairs Division regularly coordinates with Immigration Bureau officers to conduct briefings, deliver advice sessions, and guide students through compliance procedures. A staff member explained:

“We invite immigration officers to campus every semester so students can receive correct information directly.” (Chulalongkorn staff, personal communication, April 14, 2024)

The university also provides direct assistance by managing visa-extension appointment bookings and pre-checking documents for students. As one Chinese graduate student described:

“Chula staff booked my appointment and checked my documents. That reduced my anxiety a lot.” (Chinese student at Chulalongkorn, personal communication, May 10, 2023)

In contrast, universities within the RMUT and Rajabhat networks face persistent administrative challenges, including fragmented processes, reliance on outdated paper-based systems, and limited human resources. One RMUT student reported:

“Every time I submitted documents, they asked for something different. It felt like starting again each visit.” (RMUT student, personal communication, February 18, 2024)

A CLMV student studying at a regional Rajabhat institution reported similar issues:

“The staff tried to help, but there were not enough people. I waited many hours, and still I was afraid my visa would be delayed.” (CLMV student in Rajabhat, personal communication, February 22, 2023)

Taken together, these accounts underscore that institutional readiness—rather than student nationality or intent—is the decisive factor determining how immigration governance shapes student mobility patterns, compliance, and educational continuity.

1.1 Quantitative Results: Statistical Overview

Preliminary quantitative patterns indicate substantial variation in satisfaction outcomes across institutional categories, suggesting that institutional capacity plays a decisive role in shaping students' experiences and compliance behaviors.

1.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

Students at Mahidol and Chulalongkorn reported the highest satisfaction scores ($M \approx 4.26$ – 4.30), reflecting stronger administrative systems, digital readiness, and institutional capacity. RMUT and Rajabhat institutions showed substantially lower satisfaction levels, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Satisfaction Scores by Institutional Category (Likert scale 1–5)

Institutional Category	Mean (M)	SD	n
1. Mahidol University (Research–Intensive)	4.30	0.49	100
2. Chulalongkorn University (Research–Intensive)	4.26	0.52	100
3. Technological (RMUT Network)	3.64	0.66	100
4. Regional (Rajabhat System)	3.41	0.72	100

Notes:

1. $n = 400$ total survey respondents.
2. Data collected from ED–visa students in 49 Thai higher education institutions (2023–2024).
3. The term “CLMV–focused vocational institutions” refers to vocational–oriented programs offered within RMUT and Rajabhat universities, rather than an independent institutional category.

Satisfaction levels differed across institutional types. Students at Mahidol University ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.49$) and Chulalongkorn University ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.52$) reported substantially higher satisfaction compared with students in RMUT ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.66$) and Rajabhat institutions ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.72$). These patterns reflect meaningful differences in institutional support, administrative organization, and digital system readiness.

1.1.2 Inferential Statistics

A one–way ANOVA confirmed that the differences in satisfaction scores among the four institutional types were statistically significant, $F(3, 396) = 18.46$, $p < .001$. Tukey post–hoc tests showed that both Mahidol and Chulalongkorn universities had significantly higher satisfaction scores than RMUT and Rajabhat institutions, while no significant difference was found between Mahidol and Chulalongkorn. These findings indicate that higher institutional capacity is associated with higher levels of student satisfaction, consistent with Objective 1.

1.1.3 Regression Analysis

Three institutional predictors were entered into the model: (1) digital infrastructure quality, (2) staff professionalism, and (3) clarity of communication. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 396) = 27.52$, $p < .001$, and explained 29% of the variance in satisfaction ($R^2 = .29$).

1.1.4 Additional Statistical Analyses and Assumption Checks

To strengthen the robustness of the quantitative findings and ensure that the statistical inferences derived from the model meet established methodological standards, additional analyses were conducted focusing on regression diagnostics, effect sizes, and the reporting of standardized coefficients. These enhancements provide greater clarity regarding the magnitude of influence of each institutional factor on student satisfaction, as well as the validity of the model itself.

1.1.4.1 Regression Coefficients and Model Diagnostics

A multiple regression analysis was performed using three predictors—digital system quality, staff professionalism, and communication clarity—to examine their effects on overall satisfaction with immigration services. Standardized beta coefficients (β), t -values, and significance levels (p -values) were computed to provide a clearer understanding of each variable's contribution.

The results indicated that all three predictors significantly influenced satisfaction levels:

- Digital System Quality: $\beta = 0.31$, $t = 6.42$, $p < .001$
- Staff Professionalism: $\beta = 0.27$, $t = 5.38$, $p < .001$
- Communication Clarity: $\beta = 0.22$, $t = 4.57$, $p < .001$

These coefficients suggest that improvements in digital infrastructure exert the strongest influence on international student satisfaction, followed by staff professionalism and the clarity of institutional communication. The full model remained statistically significant, $F(3, 396) = 27.52$, $p < .001$, accounting for approximately 29% of the variance in satisfaction ($R^2 = .29$).

1.1.4.2 Multicollinearity and Independence of Errors

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were examined to assess potential multicollinearity among the predictors. All predictors demonstrated acceptable VIF values:

- Digital System Quality: $VIF = 1.73$
- Staff Professionalism: $VIF = 1.68$
- Communication Clarity: $VIF = 1.55$

As all values were well below the threshold of 5.0, no evidence of problematic multicollinearity was detected, confirming that the predictors exert their effects independently. To ensure independence of residuals, the Durbin-Watson statistic was computed ($DW = 1.98$), indicating no autocorrelation and meeting regression assumptions for independent errors.

1.1.4.3 Normality and Homoscedasticity of Residuals

Normality of the residuals was evaluated using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and visual inspection of Q–Q plots. Results confirmed that the residuals approximated a normal distribution ($p > .05$), and the deviation levels were within acceptable limits for social science research.

Homoscedasticity was examined using scatterplots of standardized residuals against predicted values. The residuals were evenly dispersed without systematic patterns, indicating that the assumption of equal variance was met.

1.1.4.4 Effect Size for ANOVA

To supplement the ANOVA results comparing satisfaction across the four institutional categories, effect size (η^2) was calculated to indicate the magnitude of institutional influence. The analysis yielded:

- $\eta^2 = 0.12$

This value represents a medium effect size, suggesting that differences in institutional capacity have a meaningful impact on student satisfaction levels. This aligns with qualitative findings indicating that institutional readiness—particularly in digital systems, staffing, and workflow integration—contributes substantially to variations in international student experiences.

1.5 Summary of Additional Analyses

Taken together, the additional statistical diagnostics reinforce the validity of the quantitative findings. All regression assumptions were met; multicollinearity was minimal; residuals demonstrated acceptable normality and equal variance; and institutional differences showed a meaningful effect size. These results provide further empirical support for the study's argument that institutional capacity, digital readiness, and administrative professionalism play significant roles in shaping international student satisfaction and compliance outcomes.

2. Student Voices from Interviews and Focus Groups

A Chinese student articulated the relationship between institutional support and perceived fairness:

“The rules are the same everywhere, but the way the school helps us makes all the difference.”

(Chinese student, personal communication, March 18, 2024)

Students from RMUT institutions emphasized the gaps in administrative systems:

“Sometimes the system doesn't work, and we have to go back and forth many times. It makes us feel unsure if we are doing things correctly.” (CLMV student, personal communication,

May 2, 2024)

A Rajabhat student described the emotional impact of unclear procedures: “No one explained the steps clearly. I was afraid I would make a mistake and lose my visa.” (Vietnamese student, personal communication, October 12, 2024)

In contrast, a student from Mahidol highlighted the benefits of strong institutional coordination:
“My advisor and the international office always reminded us before deadlines. I never felt alone in the process.”
 (Myanmar student, personal communication, January 21, 2024)

The student quotations reveal that international students' experiences are shaped not only by national immigration rules but, more importantly, by the institutional capacity of their universities. Students at research-intensive institutions such as Mahidol University and Chulalongkorn University highlighted clear communication, reliable digital systems, and proactive support from staff—factors that made immigration procedures feel predictable, fair, and manageable. In contrast, students from RMUT and Rajabhat institutions described system breakdowns, unclear steps, and limited assistance, which produced anxiety and uncertainty, as they feared making mistakes that could jeopardize their visa status. These accounts illustrate how institutional variations translate directly into different levels of confidence, stress, and perceived fairness among international students.

When interpreted alongside the quantitative findings, these narratives illuminate the mechanisms behind the significant differences observed between institutional categories. They demonstrate why higher-capacity institutions consistently yield higher satisfaction and smoother compliance, whereas resource-constrained institutions expose students to greater procedural ambiguity and emotional burden. Collectively, the quotations affirm the study's three objectives: they highlight contrasts in visa-management processes across institutional types (Objective 1), show how digital systems, staff professionalism, and communication clarity affect compliance and stress (Objective 2), and reveal the heightened vulnerability of certain groups within lower-capacity institutions (Objective 3). As such, the qualitative insights reinforce and humanize the statistical patterns, providing a fuller understanding of how institutional capacity shapes international student experiences in Thailand.

3. Visa Governance as a Social Structure

The findings further reveal that ED visa regulations function as social structures that shape students' adaptation, emotional well-being, and overall mobility. Requirements such as 90-day reporting, annual renewals, and periodic compliance checks create both bureaucratic and psychological pressure. As one CLMV student described:

“Every renewal felt like starting from zero. If I missed one document, everything stopped.” (CLMV student, personal communication, February 7, 2024)

Another student expressed a comparable emotional burden:

“It's not just paperwork. It affects how safe I feel living here. I always worry about what will happen if something goes wrong.” (Chinese student, personal communication, February 12, 2024)

These accounts illustrate that visa rules operate not simply as administrative procedures but as lived social experiences that shape daily navigation. Many students reported adjusting academic schedules, part-time work, and travel plans around visa deadlines, highlighting how immigration requirements become embedded in their academic routines and personal decision-making processes.

Overall, these findings affirm Objective 2 by demonstrating that visa governance influences more than students' legal status—it affects their sense of belonging, emotional security, and academic stability.

4. Demographic Vulnerabilities among Student Groups

Survey and interview data show that certain demographic groups experience disproportionately high visa-related stress—specifically female students, first-year students, and short-term/non-degree students.

4.1 Female students

“I double-check everything because I’m scared of making a mistake.” (Female student, personal communication, January 22, 2024)

4.2 First-year students

“In my first semester, I didn’t know where to ask for help.” (First-year student, personal communication, February 2, 2023)

4.3 Short-term students

“Short courses mean we must finish all visa steps quickly—any delay becomes serious.” (Short-term Chinese student, personal communication, January 19, 2023)

These patterns support Objective 3 by identifying groups disproportionately impacted by visa governance.

5. Policy Reforms and Uneven Adoption

Digital reforms including e-Extension, online 90-day reporting, and TDAC have modernized Thailand’s immigration system. However, implementation remains uneven across institutional types. Research-intensive universities have adapted quickly due to established digital infrastructures and specialized administrative teams. As one staff member from a research-intensive university explained:

“We have integrated systems and clear processes, so digital migration was smooth for us. It reduced student anxiety a lot.” (Research-intensive university staff, personal communication, June 5, 2023)

Technological universities within the RMUT network, however, face moderate challenges. They have partial digital readiness, but high student volume and program-specific requirements make full adoption difficult. One RMUT administrator commented:

“We can work with digital tools, but the workload is overwhelming. We need more manpower and training to keep everything running smoothly.” (RMUT staff, personal communication, May 9, 2024)

Regional institutions, particularly those in the Rajabhat system, experience the greatest barriers due to limited staffing, fragmented workflows, and budget constraints. As one Rajabhat administrator explained:

“We want to use digital systems, but we don’t have enough staff to manage everything. Even small updates take a lot of time.” (Rajabhat staff, personal communication, February 11, 2023)

Students also perceive this inequality clearly. A Chinese student studying at an RMUT campus noted:

“My friends at big universities finish their visa steps fast, but here we wait a long time. It feels unfair sometimes.” (Chinese student, personal communication, August 13, 2024)

Meanwhile, a CLMV student at a Rajabhat university shared:

“I’m always nervous that I might miss something because the instructions are not clear. I rely on friends more than the system.” (CLMV student, personal communication, July 14, 2024)

These discrepancies have widened institutional gaps rather than reducing them, reinforcing unequal digital readiness and uneven student experiences across Thailand’s higher education landscape.

4.6 Implications for Population Mobility and Internationalization

Overall, the findings show that Thailand’s ambition to be a regional education hub depends significantly on the linkage between institutional capacity, immigration governance, and demographic patterns. Well-equipped institutions foster compliance, retention, and positive student perceptions, while institutions with limited capacity contribute to withdrawal, non-compliance, and reputational challenges.

Table 2: Findings of the Study (2023–2024)

Section	Key Theme	Main Findings	Demographic / Policy Implications
1. Institutional Capacity	Unequal capacity	Research-intensive universities excel; RMUT & Rajabhat face procedural barriers.	Capacity gaps shape persistence; CLMV students most affected.
2. Visa Governance	ED visa as structure	Visa rules influence security and adaptation.	Determines who enters, stays, or leaves.
3. Vulnerabilities	Unequal impacts	Female, first-year, and short-term students face the highest stress.	Differential mobility outcomes.
4. Policy Reforms	Uneven adoption	Digital reforms applied unevenly.	Institutional inequality widens.
5. Mobility	Population impacts	Strong capacity → retention; weak capacity → withdrawal.	Impacts national competitiveness.

Notes:

1. $n = 400$ for survey respondents; $n = 60$ for interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).
2. Data were collected from international students holding ED visas during 2023–2024.
3. Institutional categories comprise Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University, the RMUT network, and the Rajabhat University system.

4.7 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates strong convergence across all three research objectives. Quantitatively, students at research-intensive universities consistently reported significantly higher satisfaction than those in RMUT and Rajabhat institutions, confirming substantial institutional differences (Objective 1). Qualitative evidence explains these disparities by highlighting concrete mechanisms—such as more advanced digital systems, clearer institutional communication, and greater staff professionalism—that

enable smoother compliance and lower stress in high-capacity institutions (Objective 2). At the same time, qualitative narratives from RMUT and Rajabhat students reveal heightened uncertainty, emotional strain, and reliance on informal networks, illustrating why certain demographic groups, including CLMV students, first-year learners, women, and short-term program participants, experience greater vulnerability within low-capacity environments (Objective 3). Together, the two strands reinforce one another: the quantitative results show what institutional disparities exist, while the qualitative insights clarify why these disparities occur by uncovering the underlying institutional mechanisms shaping student experiences, compliance behaviors, and overall satisfaction.

Discussion

1. Non-Immigrant “ED” Visa as a Demographic Structure

The findings indicate that the Non-Immigrant “ED” visa system functions as a demographic filter shaping student retention and enrollment patterns (United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand, 2024: 122–175). However, alternative interpretations warrant consideration. For example, some of the disparities in visa renewal success may stem not solely from governance but from differences in student characteristics across institutions. Students at flagship universities often have stronger English or Thai proficiency, higher socioeconomic backgrounds, or access to private agents—all of which may independently improve compliance outcomes. Thus, while governance exerts structural influence, the role of student-level variation should not be overlooked.

Furthermore, survey-derived insights may be affected by self-selection bias: students who choose research-intensive institutions tend to possess greater informational capital and may seek more stable administrative environments, thereby amplifying observed differences (Wright & Schartner, 2020: 124–126; Ye, 2017: 151–153). The demographic “filtering” effect attributed to ED visa governance may therefore reflect a combination of structural and compositional factors.

Nevertheless, even when controlling for institutional type, the concentration of issues among CLMV and Chinese students, first-year, and short-term students suggests that governance plays an independent role beyond student-level characteristics. This reinforces the view that visa requirements shape demographic retention by conditioning which students remain in Thailand’s educational system.

1.2 Critical Reflection

The analysis is constrained by reliance on self-reported data and cross-sectional snapshots. Without longitudinal tracking across multiple renewals, it is difficult to determine whether observed difficulties reflect *persistent structural barriers* or *initial adaptation challenges*.

1.3 Theoretical Positioning

By demonstrating how a student visa operates as a demographic mechanism, this study extends traditional migration theory—typically focused on labor or permanent settlement—into the domain of temporary educational migration, offering a novel conceptualization of visa governance as population regulation.

2. Synthesis: A New Interpretive Position for This Study

This study establishes a new analytic position in three ways:

2.1 Expanding Push–Pull Theory

By showing that push and pull forces are filtered through visa governance, this study argues that international student mobility cannot be explained by economic or cultural drivers alone. Governance structures condition and reshape these forces, introducing a demographic selection layer absent from classical Push–Pull models.

2.2 Extending Governance Theory into Higher Education

The study reframes ED visa governance as a demographic and institutional mechanism, expanding governance studies beyond their usual focus on migration control or national security. It demonstrates that temporary education visas produce population–level outcomes similar to longer–term migration regimes.

2.3 Introducing Institutional Capacity and Networks as Demographic Variables

By analyzing institutional capacity and network structures as determinants of who stays, who succeeds, and who exits, this research situates higher education within the wider field of social demography, offering a novel conceptual pathway rarely explored in Asian or ASEAN contexts. This new framing enables a richer theoretical understanding of student mobility as a multi–scalar intersection of governance, institutions, and social networks.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that international student mobility in Thailand between 2020 and 2025 is shaped not merely by economic or cultural push–pull forces, but by the interaction of three structural dimensions: (1) immigration governance, (2) institutional capacity and (3) the social networks on which students rely. These dynamics suggest that the Non–Immigrant ED visa should not be viewed as a routine administrative requirement, but as a *demographic structure* that determines who enters the system, who is able to remain, and who is forced to exit before completing their studies.

The comparison between research–intensive universities and institutions within the RMUT and Rajabhat systems highlights the significant role of institutional inequality in shaping student outcomes. Although visa regulations are identical nationwide, universities with strong support infrastructures—centralized international offices, digital systems, and established partnerships with immigration authorities—enable smoother and more predictable compliance processes. Conversely, institutions with limited staffing, financial constraints, and minimal digital capacity often transform routine visa procedures into sources of psychological burden and heightened risk, particularly for CLMV and Chinese students, first–year entrants, female students, and participants in short–term programs.

The study also underscores the pivotal mediating role of social networks. In well–resourced universities, formal networks—professional international offices, alumni organizations, and trained staff—help reduce uncertainty and lower the risk of visa–related failure. In contrast, students at regional institutions must often rely on informal networks—peers, co–national groups, or private agents—which can be supportive in practice but frequently transmit incomplete or inaccurate information. Such dependence increases the likelihood of documentation errors and misinterpretation of immigration rules.

While the findings present a clear overall pattern, several counterarguments merit consideration. Variation in student characteristics across institutional types—such as language proficiency, socioeconomic status, or access to information—may also influence visa experiences. Moreover, because the dataset includes self-reported and cross-sectional information, it cannot fully capture long-term adaptation trajectories. Nonetheless, even with these limitations in mind, both quantitative and qualitative evidence consistently indicate that structural and institutional factors exert greater influence on student pathways than individual attributes alone.

Theoretically, this study offers several key contributions:

1. It extends the Push–Pull framework by showing that push and pull forces are not autonomous, but are filtered through state regulation and institutional constraints.
2. It broadens Migration Governance Theory by illustrating that international students—though classified as temporary migrants—experience outcomes that are demographic and strategic in nature.
3. It integrates Social Network Theory to explain why identical visa regulations produce markedly different experiences across institutions and demographic groups.

Taken together, these insights move beyond describing the challenges of visa administration and propose a new conceptual lens: international education as a demographic process shaped by state regulation, institutional readiness, and network structures surrounding the student.

From a policy perspective, the findings emphasize that Thailand’s ambition to become a regional education hub depends not only on attracting international students, but on its ability to retain them through fair governance, clear communication, and supportive institutional environments across all tiers of higher education. If institutional inequalities persist, the demographic, economic, and strategic benefits of international education will remain concentrated in a few well-resourced institutions and may erode Thailand’s credibility in the global education landscape.

Overall, enabling international students to “remain smoothly in the system” is not merely a technical matter of administrative efficiency. It is a structural strategy with far-reaching implications for Thailand’s economy, society, demographic trajectory, and long-term competitiveness as a regional education hub.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should extend the analysis of international student mobility in Thailand beyond the 2020–2025 period through longitudinal designs that track student pathways from education into labor market integration, return migration, or permanent settlement. Comparative research across ASEAN countries would also be valuable in clarifying how different governance models affect retention, satisfaction, and demographic impacts. In addition, more attention should be paid to under-represented groups such as short-term learners, female students, and those enrolled in vocational programs, as these populations face distinct vulnerabilities under immigration regimes. Finally, future research could explore the role of digitalization—such as e-visa platforms and biometric systems—not only as compliance mechanisms but as demographic tools that reshape patterns of inclusion and exclusion in higher education.

Contributions of the Study

1. Academic Contributions

This study contributes to scholarship on higher education and migration by reframing student visa governance as more than an administrative requirement. The analysis demonstrates that the Non-Immigrant ED visa in Thailand operates as a demographic structure that organizes who enters, who remains, and under what conditions. By conceptualizing visa regulations through the lens of social demography, the study extends existing debates that often treat immigration procedures as neutral instruments of policy.

Another academic contribution lies in highlighting institutional disparities as determinants of migration outcomes. While prior research has often emphasized the role of national-level strategies or elite universities, this study provides a comparative perspective across multiple institutional types. By analyzing flagship, technological, and regional universities, the findings show that institutional capacity directly shapes compliance, student adaptation, and the demographic composition of international cohorts.

The research also identifies vulnerable sub-groups among international students—particularly women, first-year students, and those enrolled in short-term programs—who are disproportionately affected by visa requirements. This recognition of demographic heterogeneity adds nuance to the literature on student mobility, underscoring that migration is not experienced uniformly but varies by gender, stage of study, and program length.

Finally, the study links international education with localized demographic change, showing how the presence of Chinese and CLMV students reshapes the population profile of university towns. This contributes to broader demographic scholarship by positioning international students not only as educational actors but also as temporary migrants with significant effects on host communities.

2. Policy Contributions

From a policy perspective, the findings underline the importance of differentiated approaches to immigration governance. National-level reforms such as the introduction of digital platforms and stricter oversight of non-degree programs have been implemented unevenly across institutions. Elite universities with advanced infrastructures can adapt quickly, while resource-constrained institutions face significant challenges. This suggests that a uniform policy framework risks reproducing inequalities and exacerbating demographic vulnerabilities.

The study also contributes to policy debates by showing how immigration governance directly influences Thailand's internationalization goals. If student satisfaction and retention are tied to visa management and institutional support, then building capacity across all sectors of higher education is essential for sustaining Thailand's credibility as a regional education hub. Policies that balance security concerns with student-centered practices are more likely to generate long-term benefits in both educational and demographic terms.

Moreover, the findings point to the need for stronger coordination between immigration authorities, universities, and local communities. International students affect housing demand, labor markets, and social services in ways that extend beyond campus boundaries. Policy frameworks should therefore recognize student migration as a component of broader demographic planning, linking education strategies with labor market development and regional integration.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggest that improving the governance of international student mobility in Thailand requires differentiated policy approaches that align with the diverse capacities, missions, and constraints of different university types. A one-size-fits-all model is unlikely to address the institutional inequalities identified in the analysis. Instead, policy and practice should be tailored to the specific conditions of research-intensive universities, technological universities (RMUT), and regional universities (Rajabhat) while encouraging collaboration through shared platforms and targeted support systems.

1. Research-Intensive Universities (Chulalongkorn, Mahidol)

Role: System leaders that set standards and provide capacity transfer

Research-intensive universities already possess strong administrative infrastructures, established digital systems, and formal partnerships with immigration agencies. Their practical role should therefore extend beyond institutional boundaries.

Recommendations:

- Serve as anchor institutions by providing training workshops, secondments, and procedural templates to RMUT and Rajabhat campuses.
- Co-develop immigration support toolkits such as standardized checklists, bilingual communication templates, and digital workflow models.
- Expand campus-immigration partnerships and share best practices for on-site visa services that could be adapted at regional universities.
- Participate in national-level advisory groups, ensuring that policy reforms reflect the lived realities of diverse institutions.

These universities function as “capacity multipliers,” helping reduce systemic disparities across the sector.

2. RMUT Universities (Technological Institutions)

Role: Applied-education hubs with moderate capacity but high operational burden

RMUT institutions face mid-level resource constraints and serve large volumes of international students in applied and vocational programs, especially from CLMV countries.

Recommendations:

- Prioritize digital transition through low-cost, open-source immigration tracking and appointment systems that reduce repetitive manual processes.
- Develop faculty-level international support units, reducing over-centralization and improving responsiveness.
- Create specialized support for high-risk groups, such as short-term learners in technical programs who face compressed visa timelines.
- Some programs require institution-specific support because they operate under specialized regulatory standards—such as aviation, hospitality, and food science—even while participating in shared regional platforms.

RMUT universities should adopt a hybrid operational model: shared digital infrastructure combined with targeted support for programs with complex regulatory requirements. In addition, personnel responsible for international

students should receive regular training and exchange immigration–related information with the Immigration Bureau or other relevant agencies to ensure up–to–date knowledge and timely awareness of any legal changes.

3. Rajabhat Universities (Regional Institutions)

Role: Community–embedded institutions with the greatest administrative vulnerability

Rajabhat universities carry the heaviest burden from limited staffing, inconsistent procedures, and reliance on informal networks.

Recommendations:

- Establish basic international student units with clear workflows and bilingual communication channels as foundational infrastructure.
- Use shared immigration platforms co–developed with RMUT and supported by research–intensive universities to ensure consistency in reporting and document standards.
- Engage local authorities to create “student–friendly zones” addressing housing, healthcare access, and municipal services.
- Seek dedicated government funding for internationalization capacity building, recognizing that structural constraints cannot be solved internally.

Rajabhat institutions should be treated as priority targets for structural support, not merely expected to follow models designed for well–resourced universities.

4. Differentiated Policy Approaches for the Sector

The study underscores the need for differentiated governance models rather than uniform national regulations. While visa rules apply universally, the mechanisms for compliance should vary by institutional capacity.

Key directions:

- Policy flexibility for institutions with documented administrative limitations.
- Tiered reporting requirements, where universities with stronger infrastructures handle more digital duties and regional institutions receive simplified workflows.
- Recognition of institutional inequality as a legitimate governance variable—not an operational failure.

Such approaches align regulatory expectations with real–world capabilities, reducing structural vulnerability among students.

5. Building Shared Platforms with Targeted Functional Support

The findings strongly support the development of a national shared platform to reduce duplication and ensure consistent compliance. However, this platform must include customizable modules so that institutions with divergent missions are not forced into a rigid, one–size model.

Shared Platform Benefits:

- Common document templates and verification tools
- Multi–language communication dashboards
- Automated reminders for 90–day reporting and visa renewals
- Aggregated data for national policy planning

Targeted Support Modules:

- Features for RMUT technical programs (e.g., industrial attachments, short-term renewals)
- Features for Rajabhat institutions (e.g., simplified workflows and built-in translation support)
- Modules for research-intensive universities to integrate with advanced campus systems

A shared platform with differentiated components helps reduce inequality while respecting institutional diversity.

6. Strengthening Student-Centered and High-Risk Group Support

Because female students, first-year entrants, and short-term learners face disproportionate stress, institutions should implement tailored interventions.

Recommended actions:

- Peer-mentoring for newcomers
- Visa-literacy workshops by bilingual staff
- Counseling services addressing both bureaucratic and cultural adaptation
- Fast-track document review for high-risk groups

Targeted student support mitigates demographic vulnerabilities and reduces visa-related attrition.

7. Continuous Monitoring and Multi-level Feedback Systems

Regular monitoring is essential to link institutional practice with policy reform.

Actions include:

- Semester-based student experiences surveys
- Anonymous reporting channels for immigration difficulties
- Annual institutional capability assessments
- Data sharing with national agencies to inform reform of ED visa processes

Sustained monitoring ensures that governance adapts to emerging needs rather than relying on ad hoc fixes.

8. Summary

These practical implications highlight the need to address institutional inequality through flexible, context-specific policy approaches, supported by shared platforms and targeted assistance. Research-intensive universities should act as system leaders, RMUT institutions require hybrid forms of support, and Rajabhat universities need foundational capacity building.

Stronger collaboration and knowledge sharing across institutions should also be encouraged. Staff responsible for international student services should participate in joint training sessions with the Immigration Bureau, and immigration officers should be invited to provide regular guidance to both students and university personnel. This would help build a shared understanding, reduce errors, and make visa-related procedures smoother and more predictable.

When universities and immigration authorities coordinate more closely, the governance of international student mobility becomes more efficient and better aligned with the diverse realities of Thailand's higher education landscape.

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