



Constructing institutional visibility through university website communication: Evidence from Malaysian research universities

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ABSTRACT

University websites operate as strategic communication infrastructures through which higher education institutions construct institutional visibility, communicate identity, and sustain relationships with diverse stakeholders. While prior scholarship has examined webometric indicators, usability performance, accessibility, and online ranking visibility, less attention has been given to how institutional visibility is communicatively produced through the interface architecture of university websites. This study examines the official websites of three Malaysian research universities, namely Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) using qualitative thematic content analysis supported by visual interface evidence. Drawing on the dialogic communication theory, web visibility scholarship, and contemporary research on higher education digital communication, the study identifies three mutually reinforcing visibility-building mechanisms, specifically content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. Our findings reveal that these mechanisms generate informational visibility by organising institutional information for stakeholder access, access visibility by reducing navigation complexity, and relational visibility by linking users to enquiry channels and social media spaces. The discussion argues that institutional visibility should not be operationalised only as an external ranking or hyperlink outcome, but also as an interface-level communication outcome embedded in website design, content hierarchy, and stakeholder-oriented interaction affordances. The article contributes to strategic communication and higher education studies by proposing an interface-level model of institutional visibility and by demonstrating how university websites function as communicative infrastructures in competitive digital higher education environments. It further highlights the need for universities to design website interfaces that are clear, accessible, user-oriented, and responsive to changing contemporary stakeholder communication expectations.

Keywords: ***Institutional visibility, university website, digital communication, dialogic communication, web visibility, higher education***

INTRODUCTION

University websites have become central strategic communication infrastructures for higher education institutions (Kang & Norton, 2006; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). They are no longer merely administrative information repositories, rather, they function as digital gateways through which universities communicate institutional identity, academic reputation, international orientation, research capacity, student experience, and stakeholder accountability. In an increasingly competitive higher education environment, the official website often becomes the first institutional contact point for prospective students, parents, alumni, industry partners, funders, policy actors, researchers, and international publics (Gordon & Berhow, 2009). As universities compete for visibility within global ranking systems, international student markets, and digital reputational economies, the website becomes an important site where institutional presence is made visible and meaningful.

Existing studies on university web visibility have primarily approached visibility through webometric indicators, hyperlink structures, ranking performance, usability features, accessibility, and search engine optimisation (Aguillo et al., 2008; Thelwall, 2002a). These studies are important because they show that online presence affects how universities are discovered, evaluated, and compared. Webometrics rankings, for example, link online visibility to impact, openness, and research excellence, while global university rankings such as QS World University Rankings continue to shape institutional reputation in international higher education markets (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025; Webometrics, 2026). However, a purely metric-based approach does not fully explain how visibility is communicatively constructed within the website interface itself.

This article argues that institutional visibility is not just an external measurement of web impact, ranking position, or hyperlink presence. It is also an interface-level communication outcome produced by the way universities organise information, design stakeholder access pathways, present institutional identity, and create opportunities for interaction. This framing is consistent with recent higher education communication research, which shows that universities increasingly use digital channels to promote brand identity, differentiate themselves, and build relationships with stakeholders (Capriotti et al., 2023; Capriotti, Carretón et al., 2024). The website therefore requires analysis, not only as a technological platform, but also as a strategic communication environment.

The Malaysian higher education context provides a useful empirical setting for this study. Malaysian research universities are actively positioned within regional and global higher education systems. Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) are consistently visible in national, regional, and international ranking systems (Lee, 2014; Mok, 2015). In this environment, university websites perform a crucial communication function by presenting institutional achievements, academic programmes, research strengths, international collaborations, public engagement, and stakeholder services.

The current research examines the official websites of three Malaysian research universities: UM, UPM, and UKM. The article explores how their online presence constructs institutional visibility through three dimensions of website communication: content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. The study is guided by the following research questions: How do selected Malaysian research universities construct institutional visibility through website communication architecture? What interface-level communication mechanisms are used to support stakeholder access, information discoverability, and interaction? How do content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement contribute to informational, access, and relational visibility?

This article initially outlines the empirical patterns identified across the selected websites before interpreting these patterns in relation to the dialogic communication theory, institutional visibility, and current higher education digital communication literature. The article contributes to strategic communication scholarship by operationalising institutional visibility as a communicative outcome produced through website interface design, rather than treating it solely as a ranking or webometric indicator.

Institutional website visibility and interface-level communication

Institutional web visibility has often been studied through webometric indicators, link analysis, and university rankings (Aguillo et al., 2008; Lee & Park, 2012; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025; Thelwall, 2002b; Webometrics, 2026). These studies are useful because they show how visible a university is online. However, they do not fully explain how visibility is created through the university website itself. University websites are not only online brochures. They are strategic communication platforms that present institutional identity, provide information, and support relationships with different stakeholders, including students, staff, alumni, parents, industry partners, and international audiences (Capriotti, Carretón et al., 2024; Capriotti et al., 2023; Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Kang & Norton, 2006; McMillan, 2000a; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014; Sharp, 2001; Zainal Abidin et al., 2020).

This perspective is related to the dialogic communication theory, which argues that websites should support two-way communication, rather than only one-way information sharing (Kent & Taylor, 1998). However, contact forms, feedback links, and social media icons do not automatically create meaningful interaction (Kent, 2021; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). For interaction to happen, users must first be able to understand the content, access the website, and navigate it easily (Caglar & Mentis, 2012; Palmer, 2002; Tarafdar & Zhang, 2005). Accessibility is also important because university websites should be usable for different groups of users (Campoverde-Molina et al., 2021; World Wide Web Consortium, 2024; Yussubaliyeva et al., 2025). Therefore, website usability is an important part of institutional visibility.

Recent studies in media and communication also show that websites and digital platforms are important communication spaces. Kriyantono et al. (2023) explained that institutional websites can be assessed through usability, information quality, and service interaction quality. Deepak et al. (2020) showed that digital platforms use interactivity, multimedia, immediacy, and personalisation to improve audience engagement. Esa et al.

(2024) also argued that clear content quality is important because audiences now access information across many online platforms. These studies support this article's focus on university websites as communication platforms that shape visibility, accessibility, and stakeholder engagement.

Although previous studies have examined web rankings, usability, accessibility, and online interaction, less attention has been given to how university websites create institutional visibility through their interface. This study addresses this gap by focusing on three mechanisms: content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. Content clarity helps users understand university information. Navigational usability helps users find information easily. Dialogic engagement provides contact and interaction channels. Together, these mechanisms show that institutional visibility is shaped not only by rankings or web metrics, but also by how a university website communicates with its users.

A dialogic framework for institutional web visibility

This study is guided by the dialogic communication theory, which explains how organisations use communication platforms to build relationships and interact with their publics. Kent and Taylor (1998) argue that websites should not only provide information but should also create opportunities for meaningful interaction between organisations and stakeholders. This theory is suitable for studying university websites because universities communicate with many different publics, including prospective students, current students, staff, alumni, parents, industry partners, government agencies, and international audiences. These groups visit university websites for different purposes, such as finding academic programmes, research information, admission details, student services, institutional achievements, or contact channels. Therefore, a university website should support clear information, easy navigation, and visible interaction opportunities (Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

Kent and Taylor (1998) identified several principles of dialogic communication, including the usefulness of information, ease of interface, dialogic loop, generation of return visits, and conservation of visitors. In this study, these principles were applied to examine how university websites make institutional information visible and accessible. For example, useful information can be seen through clear programme details, research information, news, and student services. Ease of interface is demonstrated by menus, search functions, language options, and stakeholder-based links. The dialogic loop is supported by enquiry forms, contact details, feedback channels, and social media links.

This study extends the dialogic communication theory by linking website communication features to institutional visibility. Previous studies often examined whether websites have interactive features, but less attention was given to how these features help make an institution more visible, accessible, and connected to stakeholders (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). Recent studies also show that universities use digital platforms for branding, stakeholder engagement, and relationship-building, although many universities still focus more on information delivery than actual interaction (Capriotti et al., 2023; Capriotti, Zeler et al., 2024).

Based on this theoretical position, this study understands institutional website visibility as an outcome produced through three communication mechanisms: content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. Content clarity describes how clearly institutional information is organised, labelled, and presented for users. It contributes to informational visibility because stakeholders can easily understand the university's programmes, identity, services, research strengths, and achievements (Kang & Norton, 2006; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014).

Navigational usability refers to how easily users can move through the website and find the information they need. It contributes to access visibility because institutional information becomes more visible when users can reach it through simple and logical pathways (Caglar & Menten, 2012; Palmer, 2002; Tarafdar & Zhang, 2005). Dialogic engagement indicates how clearly the website provides opportunities for users to contact, follow, ask questions, or interact with the university. It contributes to relational visibility because the university becomes visible not only as an information provider, but also as an institution that can be contacted and engaged (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

Therefore, this study proposes that institutional website visibility is not only produced through rankings, hyperlinks, or webometric indicators. It is also produced through website interface design. When university websites provide clear content, easy navigation, and visible interaction channels, they strengthen institutional visibility among stakeholders.

METHODS

Research design

This study employed qualitative thematic content analysis to examine how university websites construct institutional visibility. This method enables the systematic interpretation of digital texts, visual interface elements, navigation structures, and communication affordances (Herring, 2010; McMillan, 2000b; Schreier, 2012). A directed thematic approach was utilised, with initial coding categories derived from the conceptual framework (content clarity, navigational usability, dialogic engagement) and subsequently refined through repeated interface observations (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Screenshots were collected not as decorative material, but as empirical visual evidence of interface architecture.

Case selection and research context

The study selected three Malaysian research universities: UM, UKM, and UPM. These institutions were selected because they are among Malaysia's leading research universities and because their official websites function as important public-facing communication platforms for national and international audiences. Their selection allows the study to examine institutional visibility within a competitive higher education context where university reputation, web presence, operationalisation, and stakeholder engagement are strategically important.

The ranking information in Table 1 is used only as contextual evidence of institutional prominence. It is not used as a dependent variable and does not determine the findings. Instead, rankings are used to justify why these universities represent analytically relevant cases for examining how institutional visibility is communicated through official websites. The emphasis of the study remains on website communication architecture rather than ranking performance alone.

Table 1. Contextual profile of selected Malaysian research universities

University	Malaysia Rank	QS World University Rankings 2026	Webometrics 2026 Context
UM	1	58	High web visibility among Malaysian research universities
UKM	2	126	Strong research university web presence
UPM	4	134	Strong research university web presence

Data corpus and unit of analysis

The data corpus consisted of publicly accessible official website materials from UM, UPM, and UKM. Website observation was conducted over a one-month period from April 1, 2026 to April 30, 2026. The observation focused on homepage structures, top-level menu categories, stakeholder segmentation, quick links, admissions and academic programme pages, research and institutional profile sections, language or self-selection features, contact pages, FAQ sections, office directories, enquiry links, and social media integration. These elements were selected because they represent the main interface structures through which users encounter institutional information and interaction pathways (Herring, 2010; McMillan, 2000b; Schreier, 2012).

The unit of analysis was the website's interface element. An interface element refers to any visible component that performs a communicative function, such as a menu label, navigation pathway, homepage banner, stakeholder tab, visual content block, language selector, contact button, social media icon, or search facility. This unit of analysis allowed the study to examine how small design and content features combine to produce broader institutional visibility outcomes (Herring, 2010; McMillan, 2000b; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014).

Coding procedure and trustworthiness

The coding process involved four sequential stages. Initially, the researchers conducted operationalisation by repeatedly viewing the selected websites and recording visible communication features. Subsequently, interface elements were mapped according to stakeholder access pathways, including prospective students, current students, staff, alumni, researchers, industry partners, and public audiences. Following this, the elements were coded into the three main categories of content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012). Finally, a cross-case synthesis was conducted to identify similarities, differences, and recurring institutional visibility mechanisms across UM, UPM, and UKM (Yin, 2018).

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study used an audit trail of observed features, screenshot documentation, repeated comparison across cases, and theoretical triangulation with dialogic communication, web usability, and institutional visibility literature (Nowell et al., 2017). The coding process ensured operational transparency by linking each theme to observable interface features. The study does not claim to measure user satisfaction or actual website traffic. Instead, it provides a qualitative interpretation of how website architecture communicates institutional visibility.

Table 2. Coding framework for analysing institutional website visibility

Analytical Dimension	Operational Definition	Indicators Observed	Visibility Outcome
Content clarity	Organisation and presentation of institutional information for stakeholder understanding	Homepage content hierarchy; stakeholder categories; academic programme information; research information; institutional identity messages; bilingual or self-selection features	Informational visibility
Navigational usability	Ease with which users can locate information and move through the website	Menu structure; drop-down navigation; quick links; search facility; homepage layout; logical grouping of information	Access visibility
Dialogic engagement	Availability and visibility of interaction pathways between the university and stakeholders	Contact details; enquiry forms; FAQ; office directory; feedback links; social media icons; embedded communication channels	Relational visibility

FINDINGS

The findings identify four interrelated patterns across the three selected university websites. Initial observations concern content clarity and the production of informational visibility. Another significant pattern involves self-selection and multilingual or stakeholder-based access. Furthermore, navigation plays a key role concerning usability and the production of access visibility. Finally, relational visibility is produced through active dialogic engagement. Each finding is presented with a suggested location for website screenshots. The screenshots should be inserted as visual evidence, with date of capture and source indicated below each figure.

Content clarity constructs informational visibility

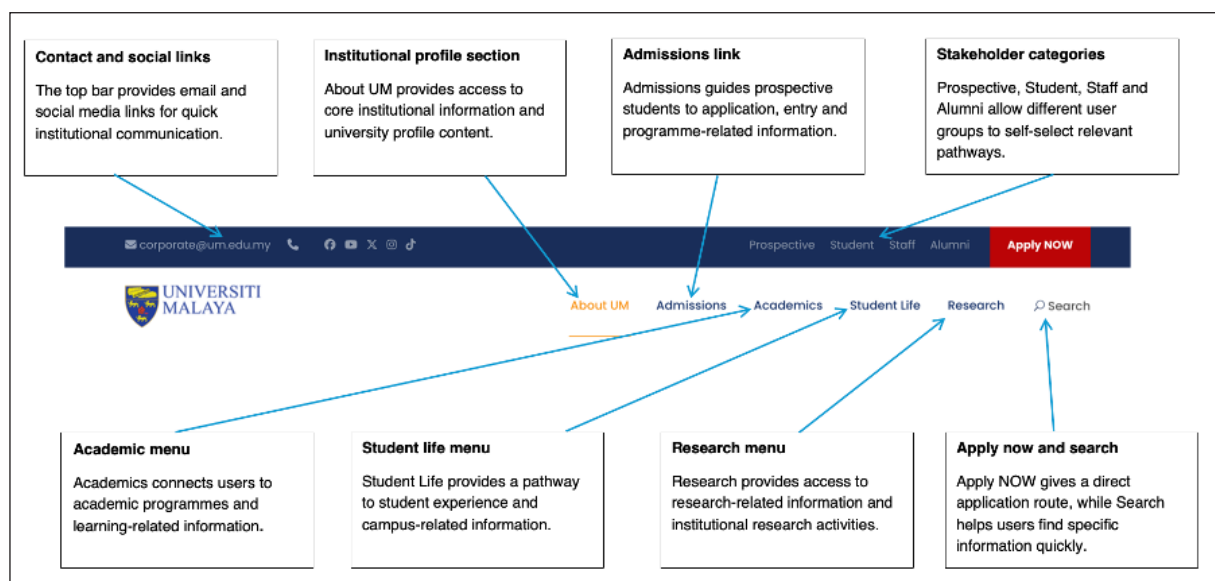
The first finding reveals that institutional visibility is constructed through the clear organisation and presentation of website content. Across UM, UPM, and UKM, the homepage functions as a primary visibility gateway. It introduces the institution to users by highlighting institutional identity, academic information, admissions, research,

campus life, services, and stakeholder categories. This content architecture transforms the homepage into a structured communication space where users can quickly understand what the university represents and where relevant information can be located.

Content clarity is particularly visible through the segmentation of information according to stakeholder needs. Instead of presenting all information as a single undifferentiated body of content, the websites organise information into categories such as admissions, academics, research, students, alumni, international affairs, campus life, services, and contact information. This segmentation supports informational visibility because it allows different publics to identify the parts of the institution that are relevant to them. For prospective students, admissions and programme information become visible. For researchers, research centres, expertise, and publications become visible. For public stakeholders, institutional achievements and official announcements become visible.

The websites also use visual hierarchy to signal institutional priorities. Homepage banners, institutional logos, ranking announcements, news sections, and featured achievements operate as visual cues that guide users toward key messages. This is important because institutional visibility is not only produced by the presence of information, but also by the prominence, arrangement, and interpretability of information. When university achievements, academic programmes, and research identity are placed visibly on the homepage, the website performs a reputational communication function.

The analysis indicates that content clarity contributes to informational visibility in multiple ways. Primarily, it reduces ambiguity by presenting institutional information through organised categories. Additionally, it lowers cognitive effort by allowing users to identify relevant information without excessive searching. Moreover, it enhances institutional representation by making selected aspects of the university more prominent to external publics. These patterns suggest that content clarity is not simply a design preference, but a strategic communication mechanism.



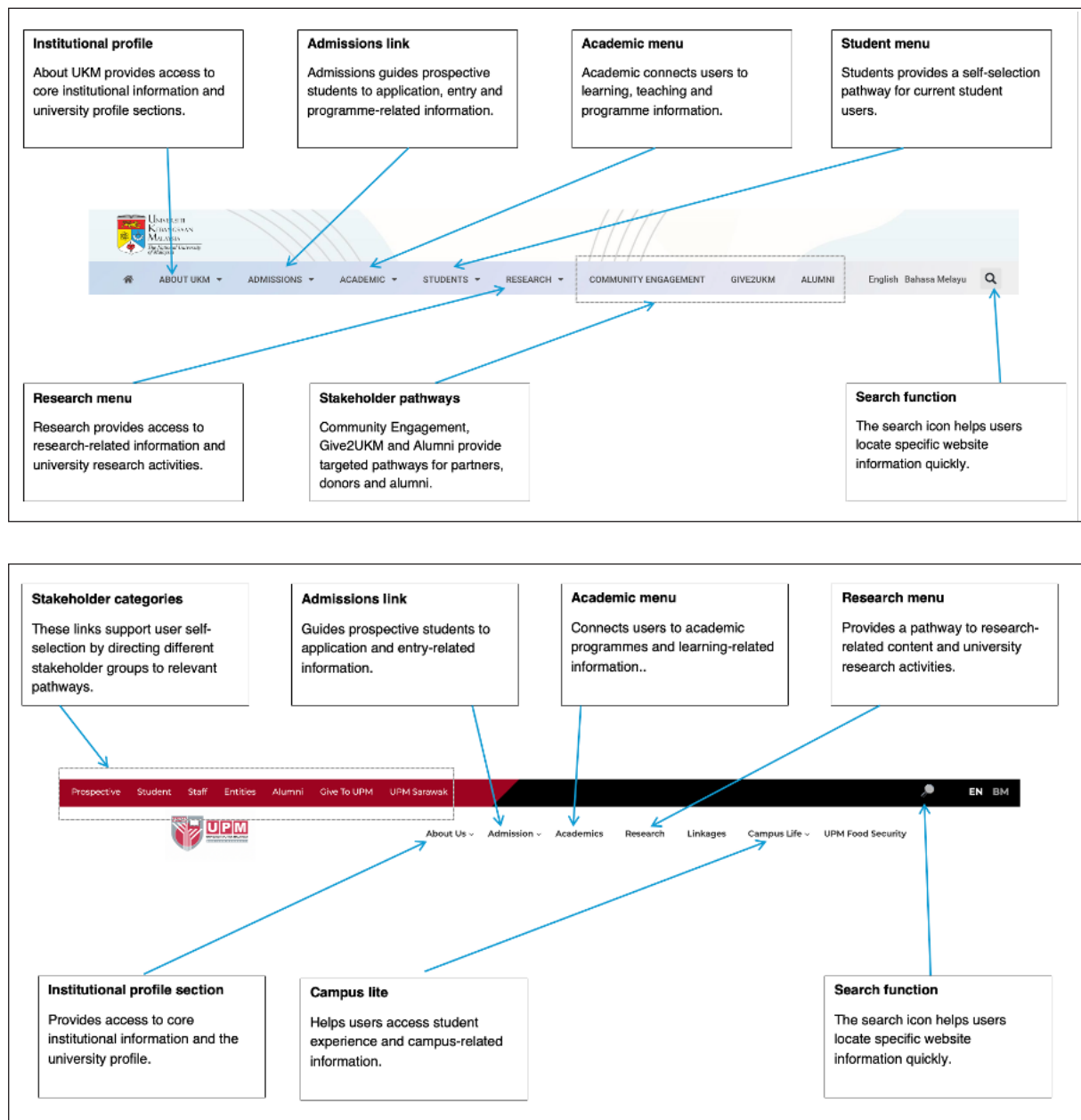


Figure 1. Website screenshots showing homepage or main menu structures of UM, UKM and UPM: Stakeholder categories, admissions links, academic menu, research menu, campus life or institutional profile sections.

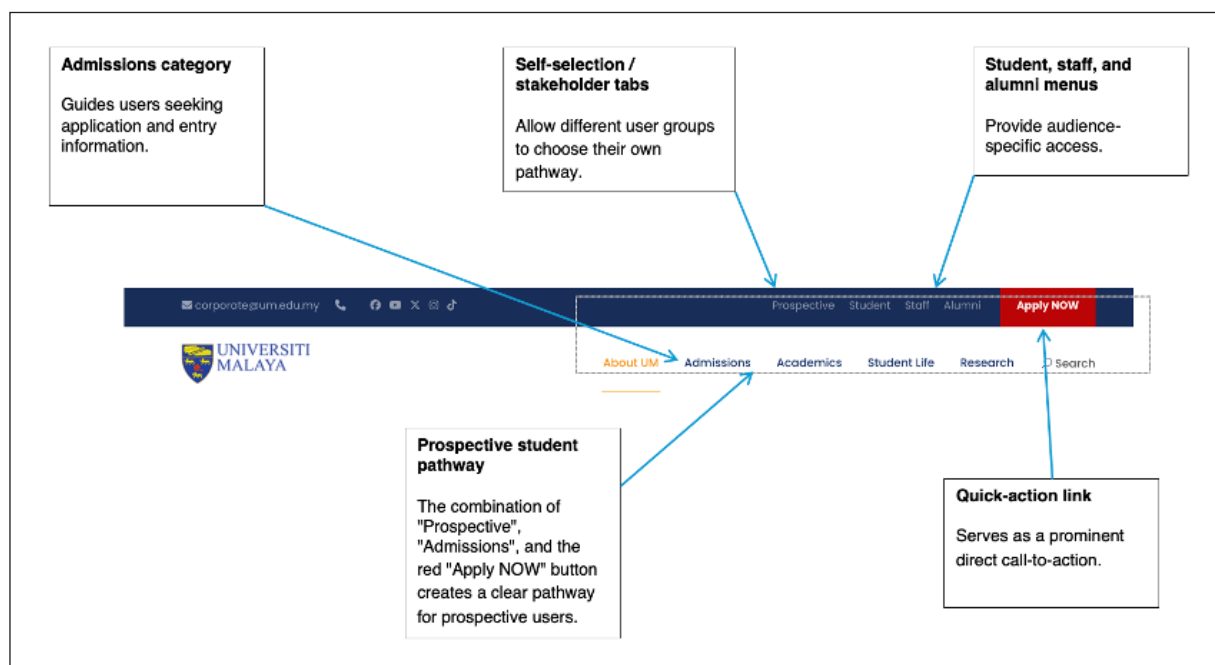
Self-selection features strengthen stakeholder-specific visibility

The second finding concerns the role of self-selection features in strengthening stakeholder-specific visibility. Self-selection refers to website features that allow users to choose information according to their needs, identity, language, or purpose of visit. These features are important because university websites serve multiple publics with different expectations. For instance, a prospective undergraduate student, an international postgraduate applicant, an academic collaborator, an alumnus, and a member of the public do not approach the website with the same information needs.

Across the selected websites, self-selection is visible in stakeholder-based menus, quick links, academic programme categories, language options, and dedicated sections for particular publics. These features enable users to enter the institutional information environment through a pathway that matches their information-seeking purpose. This contributes to visibility because it prevents important information from being hidden within a broad institutional architecture. When users are given visible pathways to choose their own information route, the website increases the chance that institutional content will be discovered and used.

Self-selection also has a language and accessibility dimension. Where language options or bilingual content are available, the website becomes more accessible to both local and international publics. In Malaysia, the strategic use of Bahasa Malaysia and English can support both national identity and global engagement. This is especially relevant for research universities that communicate with domestic students, international applicants, global academic partners, and government or industry stakeholders. Language accessibility therefore contributes to institutional visibility by broadening the interpretive reach of the website.

The analysis suggests that self-selection features create stakeholder-specific visibility. Instead of assuming a single general public, the websites recognise that visibility must be produced differently for different user groups. This finding is important because institutional visibility is not uniform. A university becomes visible to stakeholders when the website makes the relevant part of the institution visible to each stakeholder group.



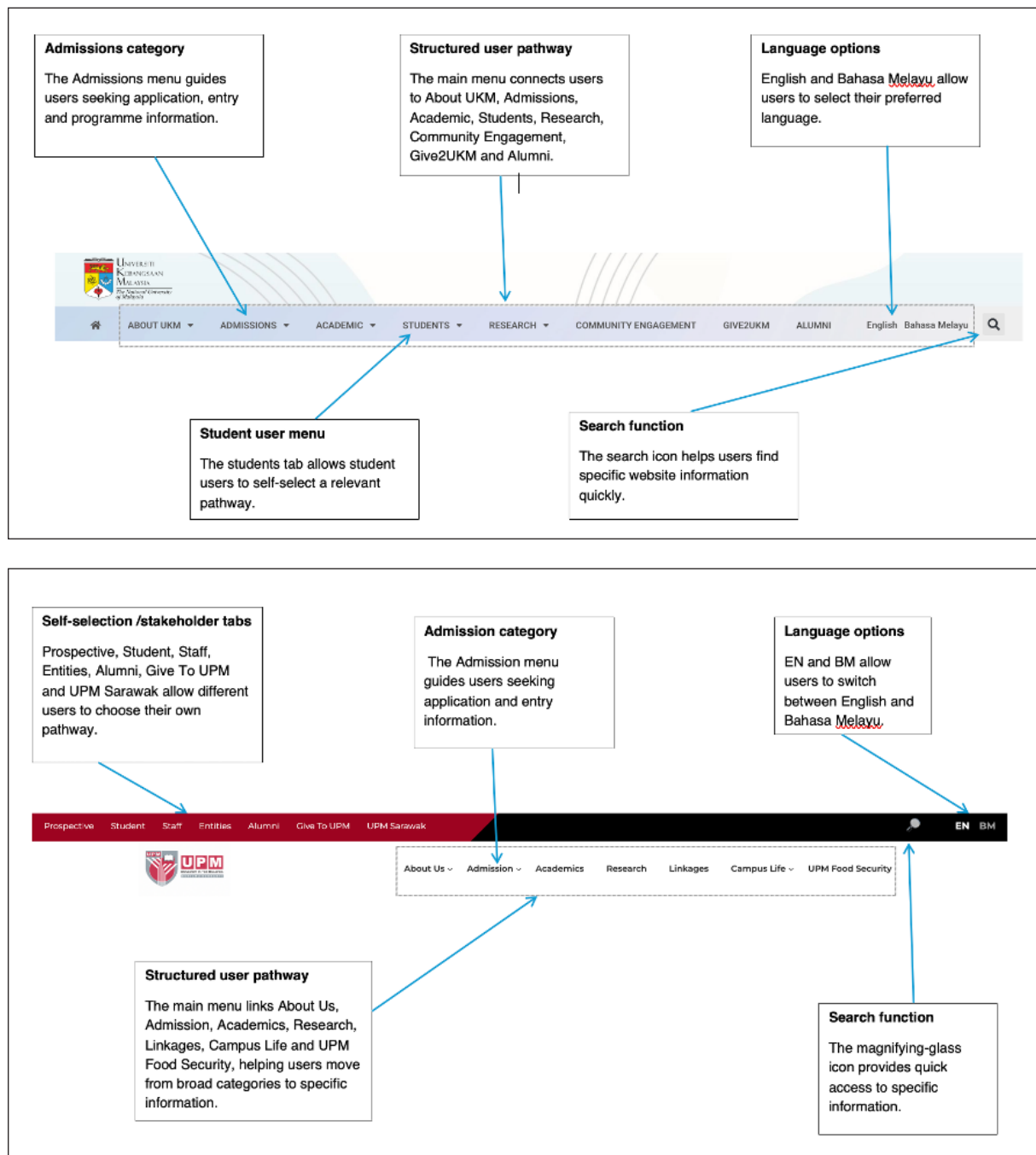


Figure 2. Website screenshots showing self-selection features, language options, stakeholder tabs, quick links, admissions categories, student/staff/alumni menus, or international user pathways for UM, UKM and UPM

Navigational usability produces access visibility

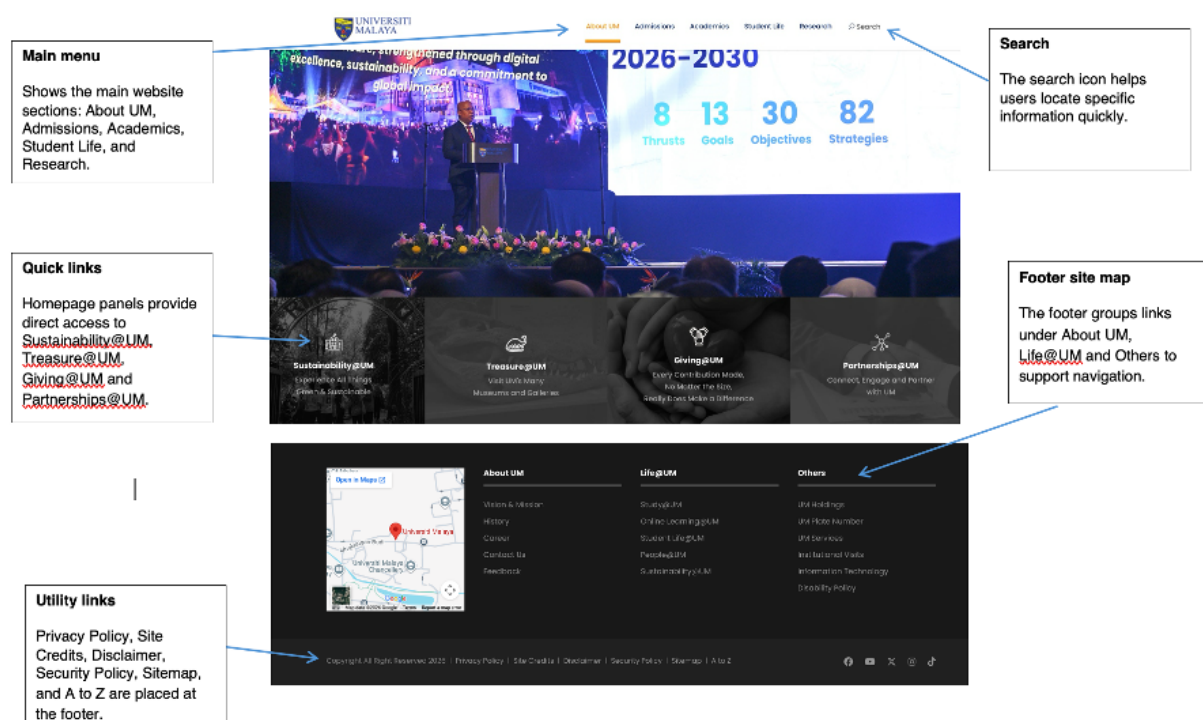
The third finding shows that navigational usability is a key mechanism through which universities produce access visibility. Access visibility refers to the extent to which institutional information can be easily located through the website's interface structure. Across the selected websites, access visibility is shaped by top-level menu design, drop-

down menus, quick links, search functions, homepage organisation, and the systematic grouping of information.

A visible institutional message is only useful when users can reach it efficiently. The analysis indicates that navigation structures serve as pathways that connect stakeholders to institutional information. Clear menu labels help users understand the structure of the website. Quick links reduce the number of steps required to reach frequently used information. Search functions provide an alternative route for users who do not follow the menu hierarchy. These navigational elements are therefore not merely technical features but communication devices that affect how institutional information is accessed and interpreted.

The selected websites demonstrate varying degrees of navigational organisation, but all three show an attempt to structure information through organised categories. The presence of admissions, academics, research, services, campus life, directory, and contact categories reflects an effort to anticipate user needs and reduce search complexity. Systematic layout also helps users evaluate the institution more quickly because important information is placed within predictable locations. For example, admissions information placed prominently on the homepage signals that prospective students are a major public. Research information placed visibly signals the institution's research identity. Contact and directory links signal openness to communication.

The analysis further shows that navigational usability contributes to perceived institutional professionalism. A website with clear pathways, consistent menus, readable labels, and organised layouts communicates competence and reliability. Conversely, weak navigation can reduce trust, make information appear fragmented, and weaken the user's perception of institutional credibility. This supports the argument that access visibility is not neutral; it affects how the institution is experienced by users.



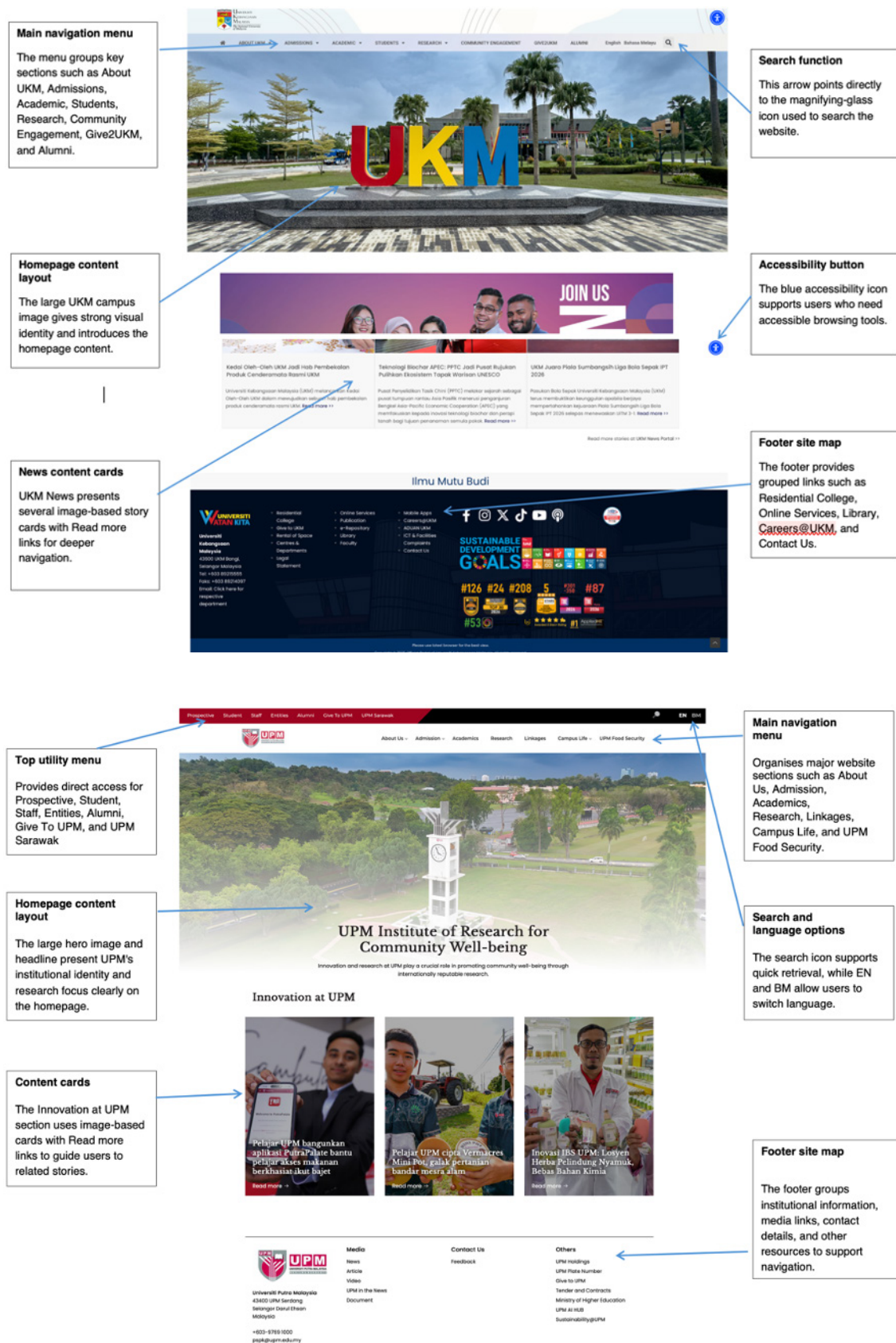


Figure 3. Website screenshots showing navigational features such as drop-down menus, search bars, quick links, homepage content layout, site map, or structured menu hierarchy for UM, UKM and UPM

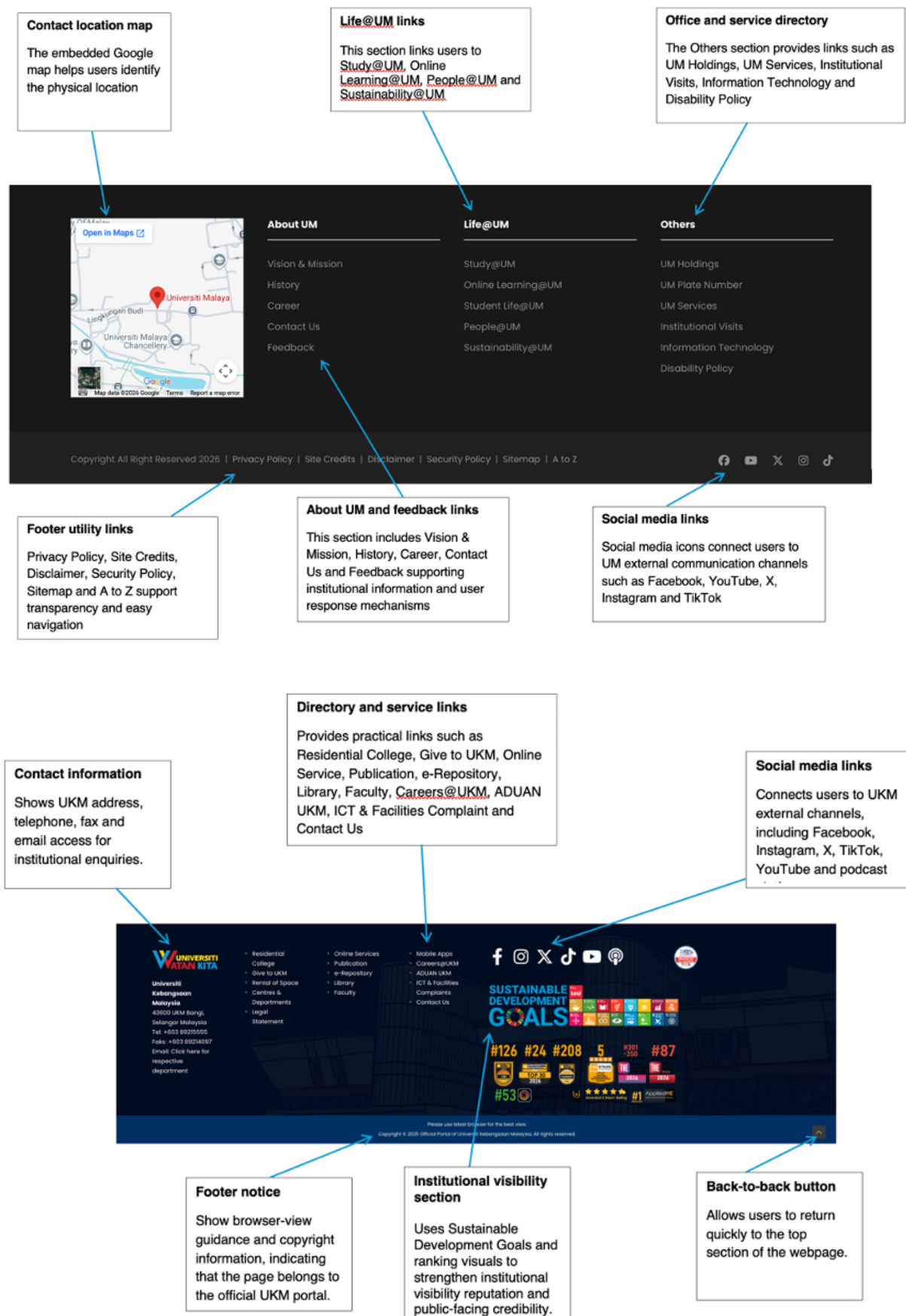
Dialogic engagement creates relational visibility

The final finding demonstrates that dialogic engagement contributes to relational visibility. Relational visibility refers to the extent to which the website makes the university available for contact, enquiry, feedback, and ongoing interaction. Across the selected websites, dialogic engagement is visible through contact details, office directories, enquiry channels, FAQ sections, social media links, and institutional communication pages.

The presence of contact information and enquiry channels is important because it transforms the website from a static information repository into a relational communication environment. Users are not only given information about the university; they are also shown how to communicate with the institution. This is particularly important in higher education because stakeholders often require direct contact for admissions, programme clarification, research collaboration, media enquiries, alumni relations, and student services.

Social media links further extend relational visibility by connecting the official website to broader digital communication ecosystems. When Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, X, or other social platforms are integrated into the website, the institution signals that communication continues beyond the official webpage. These links can support ongoing engagement, real-time updates, institutional storytelling, and networked visibility. However, the finding also suggests that the mere presence of social media icons does not guarantee dialogic communication. The icons must be visible, functional, and integrated into a meaningful stakeholder journey.

Dialogic engagement is therefore better understood as a continuum. At the basic level, the university provides contact details and social media links. At a stronger level, the website offers clear enquiry forms, responsive FAQ systems, segmented contact channels, and feedback mechanisms. At the highest level, the website actively supports reciprocal engagement by making interaction easy, visible, and relevant. The analysed websites demonstrate important dialogic affordances, but the evidence also suggests that dialogic potential could be strengthened through more interactive and stakeholder-specific communication mechanisms



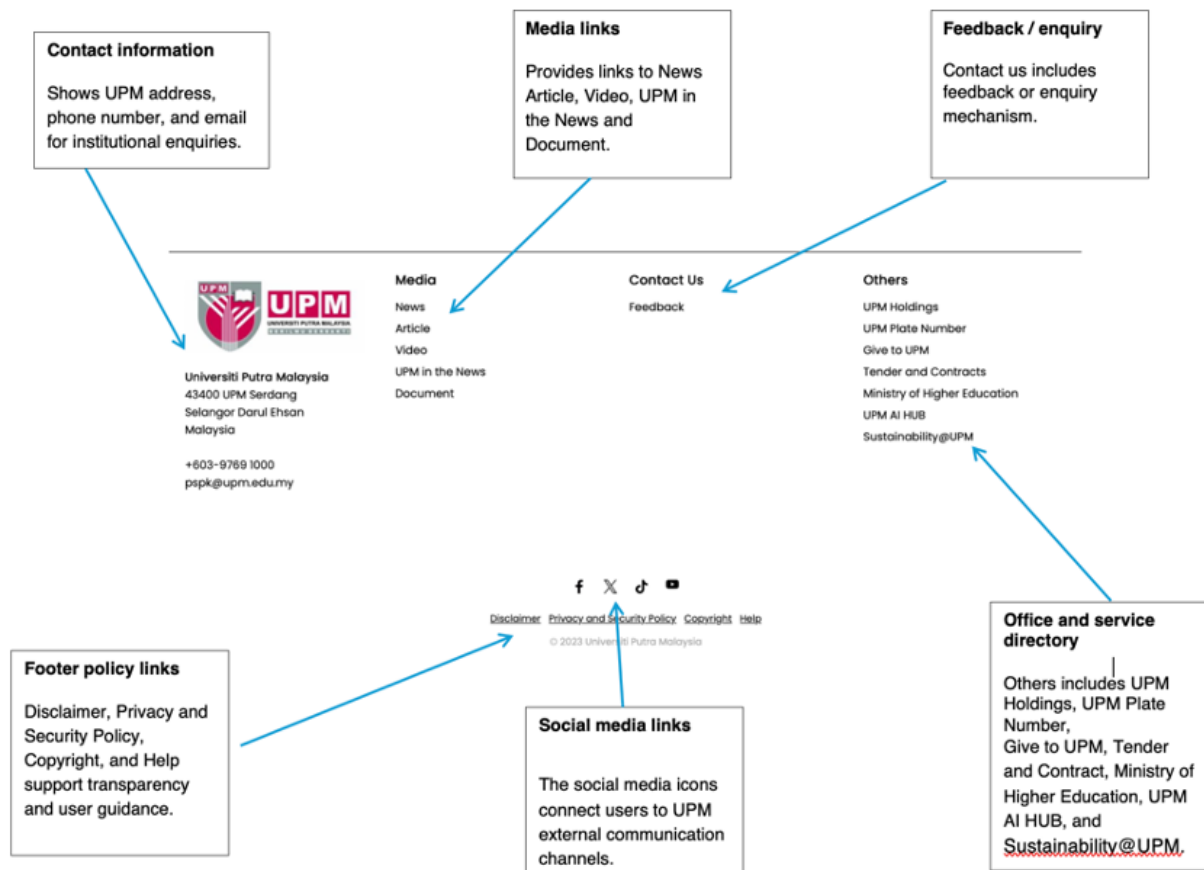


Figure 4. Website screenshots showing contact pages, enquiry forms, FAQ sections, office directory links, feedback mechanisms, or social media links for UM, UKM and UPM

Cross-case synthesis of findings

The cross-case synthesis shows that UM, UKM, and UPM share a common reliance on content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement as visibility-building mechanisms. However, the visibility outcomes are not identical. Differences are likely to emerge in the prominence of stakeholder categories, the clarity of menu architecture, the visibility of contact pathways, and the integration of social media into the website interface. Table 3 summarises the analytical synthesis.

Table 3. Cross-case synthesis of institutional website visibility mechanisms

Visibility mechanism	UM	UKM	UPM	Interpretive significance
Content clarity	Strong institutional identity and prominent academic/research information	Clear institutional identity supported by academic and stakeholder information	Stakeholder-oriented content categories and institutional service information	All three websites produce informational visibility by organizing institutional information into organized categories.

Table 3. (con't)

Visibility mechanism	UM	UKM	UPM	Interpretive significance
Self-selection	Visible pathways for prospective students, students, staff and institutional publics	Stakeholder access supported by institutional identity and user categories	Stakeholder links and service-oriented information pathways	Self-selection strengthens stakeholder-specific visibility by allowing users to locate relevant information based on purpose.
Navigational usability	Menu hierarchy, search and direct links support information discovery	Navigation supports access to academic and institutional information	Structured navigation and homepage layout support access to institutional services	Navigation produces access visibility by reducing information-search complexity.
Dialogic engagement	Contact information, directory and social links create interaction pathways	Contact and social media links extend institutional communication beyond the website	Contact channels and social media links support basic dialogic affordance	Dialogic features create relational visibility, but more interactive feedback mechanisms could strengthen two-way communication.

DISCUSSION

Reconceptualising institutional visibility as interface-level communication

The findings demonstrate that institutional visibility should not be understood only as a ranking position, webometric score, hyperlink pattern, or search engine outcome (Aguillo et al., 2008; Thelwall, 2002b). While these external indicators remain important, they do not explain the communication processes through which users encounter and interpret the institution. This study shows that visibility is also produced within the website interface through content clarity, navigational usability, and dialogic engagement. These elements operate together to make institutional identity, information, services, and relationships visible to stakeholders.

This argument contributes to web visibility scholarship by shifting the focus from measurement to meaning. Webometric indicators can show the degree to which a university is visible across the web, but they cannot fully explain whether users can understand the university's institutional profile, find relevant stakeholder information, or engage with the institution through accessible contact pathways. The findings therefore support a communication-centred understanding of visibility. Institutional visibility is not merely about being found online; it is about being meaningfully represented, navigable, and reachable once users arrive at the website.

The findings also extend the dialogic communication theory. Kent and Taylor (1998) emphasized the capacity of websites to build relationships between organisations and publics. This study suggests that dialogic potential is shaped not only by interactive features, but also by the broader communication architecture of the website. Users must first understand the content and navigate the website before they can engage dialogically.

Thus, content clarity and navigational usability are preconditions for dialogic engagement. In this sense, dialogic communication should be analysed as part of an integrated interface system rather than as a separate feature (Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

Content clarity as reputational framing

The first major implication of the findings is that content clarity functions as reputational framing. Universities selectively foreground information that communicates their institutional identity, such as rankings, academic programmes, research achievements, international collaborations, campus life, and public engagement. These choices are not neutral. They frame how stakeholders perceive the university and determine which aspects of the institution become salient (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014).

This finding aligns with recent research showing that universities use digital platforms to promote and differentiate institutional brand identity (Capriotti, Carretón et al., 2024). However, the present study shows that this branding work occurs not only on social media but also through website interface architecture. Homepage banners, menu labels, stakeholder categories, and content blocks operate as strategic framing devices. They communicate what the university considers important and how it wants to be perceived.

In the Malaysian research university context, content clarity is especially important because universities must communicate simultaneously to domestic and international audiences. They must present national relevance while also signalling global competitiveness. This dual communication task is visible in the way websites combine local identity, bilingual access, international ranking information, research excellence, and stakeholder service information. Content clarity therefore becomes a mechanism for balancing national embeddedness and global visibility.

Navigational usability as access equity and communication efficiency

The second implication concerns navigational usability. The findings show that navigation is not merely a technical usability concern; it is a communication issue linked to access equity and institutional transparency. When a university provides clear menus, quick links, search functions, and systematic layouts, it reduces barriers between stakeholders and institutional information (Palmer, 2002; Tarafdar & Zhang, 2005). This is especially important for prospective students, international applicants, parents, and members of the public who may not understand the internal administrative structure of the university.

Recent accessibility research reinforces this point. WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) 2.2 emphasizes that web content should be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust (World Wide Web Consortium, 2024). Although this study did not conduct a technical accessibility audit, the findings indicate that user-oriented navigation and content organisation are communication conditions for inclusive visibility. A website that is difficult to navigate may technically contain information but still fail to make that information visible to users.

Navigational usability also supports communication efficiency. In a competitive higher education environment, users may compare multiple universities quickly.

If institutional information is difficult to locate, users may leave the site or form negative impressions of the institution. Conversely, clear navigation communicates professionalism, responsiveness, and user orientation. This supports the argument that usability contributes to reputational communication, not merely functional convenience.

Dialogic engagement and the limits of symbolic interactivity

The third implication concerns dialogic engagement. The findings show that all three websites contain features that support relational visibility, such as contact information, enquiry channels, directories, FAQ sections, and social media links. These features are important because they signal that the institution is available for communication. However, the findings also suggest that dialogic engagement often remains at the level of access provision rather than a fully developed two-way interaction.

This distinction is important. Symbolic interactivity occurs when a website displays interactive icons or contact links but does not necessarily facilitate sustained dialogue. Functional dialogic engagement occurs when the website provides clear, segmented, responsive, and meaningful pathways for communication. For example, a generic contact email provides a basic dialogic affordance, but a structured enquiry form with stakeholder categories and clear response expectations provides a stronger dialogic mechanism. Similarly, social media icons may extend visibility, but their dialogic value depends on whether the linked platforms support active interaction (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

This finding is consistent with recent studies suggesting that universities often use digital platforms primarily for information dissemination, even when interactive tools are available (Capriotti et al., 2023; Capriotti et al., 2024). The present study extends this observation to institutional websites by showing that dialogic potential is embedded in interface design. A website may be visible and informative but still only partially dialogic if interaction pathways are not sufficiently prominent, targeted, or responsive.

Toward an interface-level model of institutional visibility

Based on the findings, this article proposes an interface-level model of institutional visibility. The model consists of three mechanisms and three outcomes. Content clarity produces informational visibility. Navigational usability produces access visibility. Dialogic engagement produces relational visibility. These outcomes are interconnected. Informational visibility is weakened if navigation is poor. Access visibility is incomplete if the information lacks clarity. Relational visibility is limited if users cannot easily find interaction pathways.

The model suggests that universities should evaluate their websites not only through external metrics but also through the communicative quality of the interface. A high-ranking university website may still have weak institutional visibility if users cannot interpret its content, find stakeholder information, or contact the institution easily. Conversely, improvements in content organisation, navigation, and dialogic pathways can strengthen institutional visibility even before changes are reflected in ranking indicators.

This model also has methodological implications. Future studies can operationalise the three mechanisms through mixed methods, combining qualitative interface analysis, accessibility audits, user testing, web analytics, and stakeholder interviews. Such approaches would allow researchers to examine not only what website features are present but also how users experience and interpret them.

CONCLUSION

This article explains institutional visibility as something created through the university website interface. University websites are not only digital brochures, but also strategic communication platforms (Kang & Norton, 2006; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). The findings show that visibility is shaped by three main elements: clear content, easy navigation, and dialogic engagement (Thelwall, 2002b; Aguillo et al., 2008). These elements create informational visibility, access visibility, and relational visibility. This study also adds to the dialogic communication theory by showing that users must first understand and find information before meaningful interaction can happen (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

The findings suggest that universities should evaluate their websites based on how well they communicate with users. To improve visibility, communication teams should regularly review website content and design homepages based on user needs, not only internal university structures. Web administrators should improve search functions, mobile navigation, and accessibility by following WCAG 2.2 standards (Palmer, 2002; Tarafdar & Zhang, 2005; World Wide Web Consortium, 2024). Dialogic features should also be improved through enquiry forms, stakeholder-based FAQs, and social media links that support meaningful engagement (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

This study is limited because it only analyses the visible website features of three Malaysian research universities during a specific period. It does not measure user experience, website traffic, or stakeholder perceptions. Future studies should include more types of universities, such as private, regional, and international institutions. They should also use mixed methods, including interface analysis, usability testing, accessibility audits, interviews, and web analytics. Overall, universities should not only focus on being online, but also design websites that clearly present their identity, make information easy to access, and support real communication with users.

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