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Headline: Private education scores poorly amid rising competition

Private education scores poorly amid rising competition

By Sue-Ann Chia

PRIVATE education institutes saw their customer satisfaction levels dip to their lowest levels in nine years. The sector scored just 64.1 points on the Singapore Management University's Institute of Service Excellence's Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) survey, which measured customer satisfaction for various sectors for the three months ended June 30.

The score was 2.6 per cent lower compared with the same period last year and the lowest since the CSISG began tracking the sector in 2007. The last time scores dipped this low was in 2010, when private education scored 65 points.

The sector's fall in satisfaction was led by private vocational institutes. Part-time students at vocational institutes registered their dissatisfaction with service levels and gave a score of 64.7, which is down nearly 5 per cent from the same period last year. Similarly, satisfaction scores for full time students at vocational institutes dropped 1.8 per cent to 68.1 on the index.

However, scores were higher for private non-vocational institutes. Full-time students saw a rise of 2.2 per cent to score 63.1 on the index while part-time students gave

their schools slightly higher scores of 65.1, up 0.3 per cent higher than last year.

Private education institutes offering part-time or vocational programmes may use these findings to examine if it applies to their own student population, and if so, look into areas that can help improve the student experience, said Marcus Lee, academic director of Institute of Service Excellence at SMU (ISES) and assistant professor of marketing (practice).

Crowded market

Industry players said that the scores reflected the rising competition for students here, as more players crowd the market, especially for vocational institutes. This is because of a national push by the government called SkillsFuture that aims to equip Singaporeans with a mastery of skills to prepare for a fast changing economy in the future.

Among other moves, all Singaporeans will get a SkillsFuture credit of S\$500, which they can use to pay for training and skill upgrading courses. Mike Fleming, director of training at CerealTech School of Baking Technology, said that he is worried about letting in less qualified schools to raise competition. "Our major concern with the SkillsFu-

ture is that the government will let less qualified schools into the market on the pretext of opening up competition. These new ones do not have certification or standards and by this, we could be disadvantaged," he said.

He also cited the shortage of manpower as a reason for why service levels have dropped, owing to the lack of instructors. "Dissatisfaction can be from the course content and skills of instructors. There is a shortage of labour across all sectors, and not enough people with work life experiences that are able to relate to students and paint a clear picture of the industry. Many instructors are only just out of a course and have little industry experience," he explained.

His school is trying to ensure quality by getting all students to rate the course and instructor, which the school will then follow up with. Apart from that, they are working to ensure their graduates are employable and are given cutting edge baking techniques.

"It is important to keep abreast of what is happening in the industry so course content is relevant to what is going on in the industry. Our training is focused on working requirements in a bakery operation so we try and make it as realistic as possible," he said.

David Ang, director of corporate services and training at consultancy Human Capital Singapore, said that the push for SkillsFuture will see even more training institutes jump onto the bandwagon to profit from the extra funds in the market.

"There could be abuses from companies looking to make a quick buck. For individuals, they have to scrutinise the course and look at who is speaking or training before they sign up," he said.

"One way to screen is to look at who the organiser is partnering. If it is a government agency or a reputable company, there is less chance of getting fleeced."



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