

CSISG 2014 Q2 RESULTS: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EDUCATION

Tertiary brand-building, one student at a time

Offering students the support they need is crucial to help them meet challenges and prepare them for the workplace

SCOTT MARSH
scott@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – What's one of the most effective ways a tertiary institution can build their brand? By letting their students and alumni put their best face forward.

Advertisements do a great job of informing potential students about the merits of an institution or course. But word-of-mouth from a school's current and former students can make a crucial difference in turning a potential student into an enrolled student.

It's small wonder that many tertiary institutions invest significant time and effort in offering students a comprehensive support network, in recognition of the fact that the role of a modern tertiary institution extends far beyond imparting knowledge.

Said Dr Marcus Lee, academic director, Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) at Singapore Management University: "It is in the interest of tertiary institutions to provide support and help to their students and to do it well.

"Graduating students and alumni are the institutions' most convincing brand ambassadors."

Another reason for the increased importance of student support services is to help ensure that graduates are better prepared before joining the workforce.

Said Ms Caroline Lim, director, ISES: "As job opportunities become less optimistic and Singapore's economic outlook becomes less favourable for new graduates, tertiary students are increasingly concerned about ensuring that what they are studying will be relevant to prospective employers and the industry.

"Students will need support outside the classroom to make sure they enter working life well prepared beyond their academic qualifications."

SUPPORT COUNTS

One of the key findings of the recently released Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) 2014 Q2 results highlighted the importance of student support services, which includes financial, career and emotional support.

This factor was consistently among the top two priorities of respondents surveyed in tertiary institutions.

Ms Lion Alexis Meitlan, who's currently enrolled at Murdoch University (Kaplan), is one such student who values the role of student support services.

Said the 20-year-old: "This is a crucial period for students who are going to the workforce as young professionals. It can be confusing, daunting and



Tertiary institutions go to great lengths to better prepare students for the workforce. TODAY FILE PHOTO

a time where many decisions come into play.

"I think people often misunderstand the role of such services, thinking that it's for people who are financially inadequate, or facing challenging issues in their personal lives."

Ms Christie Yeo Qing Wen, a 19-year-old student at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, agrees that student support services play a crucial, if underrated, role.

"While I do not directly benefit from such services, they are important for many people. Student support services are often overlooked within the education system."

Some students, such as Ms Denise Tan Jing Ru, felt that the role of teachers should not be neglected. The 18-year-old Temasek Polytechnic student said: "Teachers play an important role in motivating, inspiring and guiding students.

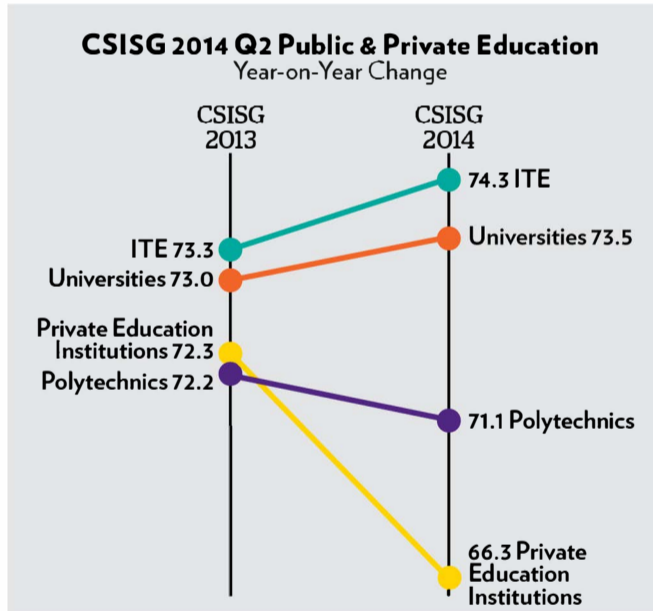
"Teachers have to be emotionally intelligent and open. This is especially for teachers dealing with troubled students. Schools should have teachers with the skills to handle such situations."

STUDENT WELLNESS

Many tertiary institutions have gone to great lengths to ensure their students have the support they need to succeed academically. Temasek Polytechnic, for example, assigns to each student a Care Person who provides pastoral support in non-academic areas.

Said a spokesperson: "Students may also approach our Befrienders or School-based Counsellors who are lecturers trained in counselling to seek extra support in managing issues in school and life."

At SMU, the Mrs Wong Kwok Leong Student Wellness Centre is



dedicated to providing students with quality mental health support.

Said Associate Professor Ong Siow Heng, Dean of Students, Singapore Management University: "This facility provides safe spaces for students to explore and manage their personal lives through attending sessions with our professional counsellors or simply to have a mental repose from the daily rigours of academic life."

Students experiencing financial difficulties often have an avenue to turn to for help at tertiary institutions.

At Temasek Polytechnic, students can approach school counsellors to explore financial assistance schemes including tuition loans and scholarships.

SMU believes in what it terms a "needs-blind" admission policy, where no deserving student will be deprived of an education because of financial hardship. It offers grants, bursaries, loans and scholarships to needy students, so that they can focus on their studies and enjoy an enriching educational journey.

It's a view other tertiary institutions like Republic Polytechnic also share. Said a spokesperson: "Republic Polytechnic is committed to ensuring that no deserving student is deprived of a quality education in RP because of financial constraints."

WORKPLACE PREPPERS

Arguably one of the most critical beyond-curriculum roles a tertiary institution can fulfill is preparing its undergraduates to enter the workforce.

At SMU, for instance, the Dato' Kho Hui Meng Career Centre (DKHMCC) works with students to develop career-preparation and career-management strategies. To help prepare students for their entry into the workforce, the centre organises workshops covering topics such as social etiquette and personal branding.

In recognition of the importance of cooperating with external partners, the centre also works with employers to organise annual recruitment and industry talks as well as networking events.

Temasek Polytechnic offers students post-diploma career and course advising services to "help enhance graduates' employability". Services include career and continuing education guidance as well as part-time/full-time career opportunities.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Working with industry partners results in a win-win situation for all parties. Students are kept abreast of the latest developments in a fast-paced and dynamic workplace. Tertiary institutions are able to expand their knowledge base beyond campus walls, and industry partners get the chance to work and possibly recruit talented graduates.

There is, however, always room to do more. Looking ahead, ISES' Ms Lim suggested that undergraduates could be given the chance to work more closely with industry.

Said Ms Lim: "Institutions can look towards becoming more involved in industry projects. For example, they could work with businesses to bring real industry problems into the classroom."

Dr Lee also suggested that institutions don't overlook the importance of paying it forward. "In addition to thinking about the skills they need, tertiary institutions should also think about how graduates can make a meaningful contribution to society. Using insights from this approach helps inform institutions on the kind of support they give to students."

This report is a collaborative project between TODAY and the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University.