

In the service of learning

While tertiary students shouldn't be treated like customers, improving the way they are serviced can help improve learning outcomes.
KAN KWOK LEONG reports

BALLROOM dancing classes, community outreach projects, experiments outside of classroom lessons – these are some of the varied initiatives that Singapore's tertiary institutions have launched to help enrich their students' academic experience.

And the efforts seem to be paying off. The latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) survey results on the public education sector showed that university and polytechnic students were more satisfied this year with their schools compared to the previous year.

Both the universities and polytechnics sub-sectors made noteworthy improvements from 2012, according to the results that were released earlier this month.

Universities registered a 9.5 per cent rise in their scores to 73.1 points, while polytechnics gained 3.6 per cent to 72.2 points.

An analysis of the results showed that how well the enrolled courses match the interests and expectations of university students would have the most impact on their perceptions of quality and satisfaction, according to the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University (ISES), which commissioned the survey.

On the other hand, the relevance of the courses of study to their future careers is ranked highest by polytechnic students in their perception of quality and satisfaction.

"It is clear that students from different kinds of educational institutions care about different things and administrators should consider paying attention to aspects of the student experience that most strongly impact their students' perceptions of quality," said Singapore Management University's (SMU) assistant professor of marketing (practice) Marcus Lee, who is also the academic director of ISES.

While the improvements were clear, whether students should be treated as customers to begin with was debatable.

"Calling students 'customers' risks falling into the trap of imagining the teacher-student relationship as one in which the teaching role is active and the learning role is passive," said Professor Kam Chan Hin, associate provost (undergraduate education), Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

He added: "At NTU, we view students as the co-owners, co-drivers and co-creators of their own student experience. This means that students have a hand in their own university education and learning beyond the classroom."

SMU's Associate Professor Lee believed that students should be treated more like patients in a hospital than customers.

"You are patients in my hospital. I will do this and you may not like it but it will be good for you. As with healthcare, people that are more satisfied recover faster. For schools, this will mean better learning outcomes," he said.

That said, industry players agreed that student feedback such as the CSISG can help school administrators plan and develop new initiatives, as well as in fine-tuning existing ones.

"The CSISG is a useful gauge of students' satisfaction level over time and to gauge how well we are doing vis-à-vis the education sector," said Prof Kam.

NTU has also stepped up its engagement with students, and has involved them in consultations on various school matters, plus other efforts such as NTU's university-wide Student Experience Surveys.

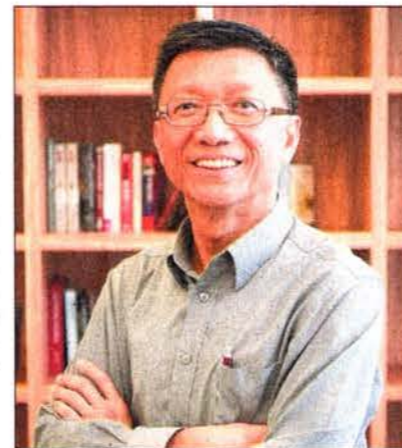
Likewise, the National University of Singapore (NUS) is constantly looking out for innovative ways to enrich our students' educational experience.

One recent educational innovation that redefined the way our students live and learn on campus was the NUS University Town, Singapore's first residential college experience.



Enriching students' educational experience: NUS University Town (above), Singapore's first residential college, combines campus living with an exciting multidisciplinary academic programme. FILE PHOTO

Prof Kam: 'At NTU, we view students as the co-owners, co-drivers and co-creators of their own student experience. This means that students have a hand in their own university education and learning beyond the classroom.'



"We pioneered a new model that combines campus living with an exciting multidisciplinary academic programme, building on NUS' reputation for enabling research and education across disciplines," said Professor Tan Eng Chye, deputy president (academic affairs) and provost, NUS. Meanwhile, Republic Polytechnic's

(RP) pioneering problem-based learning approach is focused on promoting innovation and entrepreneurial skills that have become more relevant in today's working world.

"At Republic Polytechnic, we continue to work on improving the learning and teaching environment to ensure it is relevant for students and all

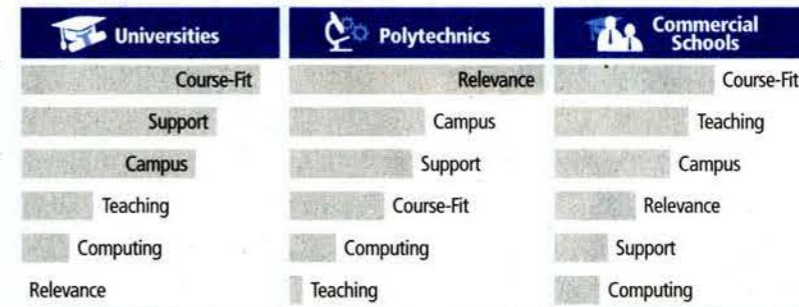
stakeholders," said an RP spokesman.

University and polytechnic students also feel support services are important, more so than commercial school students, the survey showed. In this regard, SMU has made efforts to improve its administrative services.

"We have rolled out a Business Process Improvement initiative to streamline our administrative processes to provide the best possible operational support to our students so that they can focus their time and energy on attaining academic excellence," said Professor Pang Yang Hoong, vice provost (undergraduate), SMU.

Student satisfaction

What's important



BT Graphics: Jonathan Goh

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