The learning experience, and more

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SINGAPORE – Before there was the Our Singapore Conversation, another conversation — somewhat smaller in scope — was taking place in the residential halls, canteens and theatres of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in 2010.

The university collected thoughts about living and learning at NTU from students through a varsity-wide Student Experience Survey, with the aim of making the student experience as enjoyable and fulfilling as possible.

"We are attempting to meet and somewhat surpass their expectations," said Professor Kam Chan Hin, Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education), NTU. "This includes consulting student representatives on matters such as infrastructural improvements around campus and the designs of future halls of residence."

This translated to more seating areas at canteens, better ventilation, lighting and more electronic powerpoints in common study areas.

Like NTU, tertiary institutions — universities, polytechnics and Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs) — are seeking to meet the rising expectations of successive generations of students, by holding internal surveys, redesigning campus experiences, and keeping curriculum in touch with industry trends.

Their efforts seem to be paying off. In the latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) for the education sector released earlier this month, the three public universities — National University of Singapore (NUS), NTU and Singapore Management University (SMU) — saw improved satisfaction levels of their "customers" — the fee-paying students. Likewise, student satisfaction also improved for most of the polytechnics and ITEs.

Overall, the public education sector saw its satisfaction score rise 7.9 per cent to 72.8 points this year, from 67.5 points a year ago. The private education sector was also rated, earning a score of 72.2 points, up 4.6 per cent from 69 points a year ago.

The index is compiled by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) at SMU. Respondents were asked to rate campus facilities, teaching standards, suitability of course, relevance to the job market, financial support, counselling and IT infrastructure.

Commenting on the results, ISES Academic Director Marcus Lee, who is also Assistant Professor of Marketing (Practice) at SMU, had said: "Students from different educational institutions care about different things. Administrators should consider paying attention to aspects of the student experience that most strongly impact students' perception of quality."

WHAT STUDENTS SAY

According to the index, the most important factor affecting satisfaction for respondents in universities was course fit — whether a course matched their interest and expectations. Polytechnic respondents, meanwhile, ranked relevance — whether the course offered relevant experience and prospects — as the most important factor affecting satisfaction levels, reflecting the polytechnics' vocational slant.

Students TODAY spoke to — polytechnic and university students alike — felt whether a course matched their interest came first, and said they chose schools based on whether they offered the right course.

Singapore Polytechnic (SP) student Ong Wai Meng, for instance, said he looked for courses that were in line with his interests and "sounded interesting and fun". The 19-year-old is now pursuing a diploma in creative writing for television and new media.

"Overall, I'm pretty satisfied with my time at my school," he said. "If you are willing to venture out of your comfort zone, lecturers are always looking out for ways for you to improve and try new things."

A vibrant campus is another consideration of students, with the CSISG finding tertiary students consistently attaching high importance to campus life and facilities.

Arthur Nauer, a 21-year-old mechanical engineering student at SP, felt that good school environments are "quite important". Before coming to his current school, he pictured polytechnic life to be "fun and exciting", but has so far found it "really dull". Having a good range of quality co-curricular activities is necessary to help students socialise with one another, he pointed out.

Other students, such as Dan Thio, 22, considered the campus location and career prospects of the degree when choosing a school.

"I look out for the past fresh graduates' employment rate and starting salary in the course I am interested in," said the first-year student at SMU's School of Information Systems.

To this end, SMU said it constantly monitors industry trends, market demand and economic developments, and tailors its subject offerings to students to prepare them for the workforce after graduation.

Polytechnics — which have traditionally cultivated strong industry relationships to provide students with work attachments — have also sought to expand the scope of real-world experience for students.

Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP), for instance, offers "enterprise projects" for students in collaboration with industry partners. "All our partners have shared, in a survey conducted in 2012, that they are happy with the overall quality of our projects, including Team NYP's ability to provide innovative and creative solutions," a spokesperson said. It also conducts its own surveys to keep track of progress — it carried out its Student Engagement Survey with 6,000 students last year, and found that nine in 10 were satisfied with their experience.

Recognising that students value campus interactivity, NUS said its University Town (UTown) was conceptualised with the aim of combining campus living with a multidisciplinary academic programme.

"At UTown, all NUS students also have access to state-of-the-art educational facilities, IT-enabled learning resources and various recreational and learning spaces that promotes interaction not just between students, but also between students and faculty," said Professor Tan Eng Chye, Deputy President (Academic Affairs) and Provost of NUS.

Institutions are also making an effort to improve teaching and learning. For example, NUS created a S$5 million "Learning Innovation Fund — Technology" to promote experimentation and adaptation of technology-enhanced learning.

"Key classes will be systematically redesigned to promote more active learning by integrating online lectures with targeted and integrative classroom activities," said Prof Tan.

As the race to attract students and meet their expectations continues, NTU's Prof Kam offered a note of caution. "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," he said.

Students should be "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," he said. "Student life is only as good as what you make it."

Whether a course matched students' expectations and interest was an important factor for satisfaction, according to the survey. TODAY FILE PHOTO

> If you are willing to venture out of your comfort zone, lecturers are always looking out for ways for you to improve and try new things.
> **Ong Wai Meng**
> STUDENT AT SINGAPORE POLYTECHNIC

* WHAT STUDENTS FOUND MOST IMPORTANT

Universities	Polytechnics
Course-fit	Relevance
Support	Campus
Campus	Support
Teaching	Course-fit
Computing	Computing
Relevance	Teaching

The importance ranking of these dimensions are accurate at the sub-sector level and will differ when computed for individual institutions.

SOURCE: ISES

* CSISG 2013 Q2 EDUCATION SUB-SECTORS YEAR-ON-YEAR CHANGE

Public education sub-sector	2013 score	Change
Universities	73.1	+6.4
ITE	73.2	+3.6
Polytechnics	72.2	+2.5

Significant year-on-year changes are represented in red/green

SOURCE: ISES