Using the Students-as-Customers Concept in Technology Disciplines: Students' Perspectives

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Abstract—Educational institutions increasingly adopt the students-as-customers concept to satisfy their students. Understanding students' perspectives on the use of this business concept in educational institutions is necessary for the institutions to effectively align these perspectives with their management practice. The study investigates whether students in technology and business disciplines have significantly different attitudes toward using the students-as-customers concept in educational institutions and explores the impact of treating students as customers in technology disciplines under students' perspectives. The results from quantitative and qualitative data analyses show that technology students, in contrast to business students, fairly disagree with educational institutions to treat students as customers. Treating students as customers in technology disciplines will have a negative influence on teaching performance, instructor-student relationships and educational institutions' aim, but a positive influence on service quality in educational institutions. The paper discusses the findings and concludes with implications and limitations of the study.

Keywords—Education, information technology, students-as-customers, technology disciplines.

I. INTRODUCTION

MANAGEMENT practice in higher education institutions is under review on the need of economic accountability and performance improvement as a result of reduced government funding and increased competitiveness in higher education. Most educational institutions have competed with one another to regain trust from the public as well as attack and retain their students including students in technology disciplines. They have reshaped their management practice and embraced customer satisfaction perspective of total quality management (TQM) in the hope that it will be the key to survival as it happened in a business sector [6]. In other words, most universities have adopted the students-as-customers concept to use in their organizations. However, many researchers have continually debated the adoption of the students-as-customers concept to be used in higher education institutions [2,6,7,15].

As the management practice significantly affects an organization's productivity and profitability, an educational institution should understand what students perceive the institution's management practice associated with the

students-as-customers concept and effectively align it with the institution's strategic management. Despite its apparent importance, this issue has gained little attention from researchers and academics in information technology. Accordingly, this study seeks to understand students' perspectives on the use of the students-as-customers concept in technology disciplines. As students in different disciplines may perceive business orientation in different aspects [11], the study also examines whether technology and business students' attitudes toward using this concept in higher education are different.

The next section describes basic principles of the students-as-customers concept followed by research design and analysis results. Discussion of the findings is then presented. The paper concludes with implications and limitations of the study.

II. STUDENTS-AS-CUSTOMERS CONCEPT

Treating students as customers is accentuated since scholars began proposing the application of total quality management (TQM) to higher educational institutions [3,16]. The total quality management is originally applied in the business sector to improve organizational performance which aims to provide services with higher levels of consumer satisfaction and, in turn, enhance profitability for the organization.

Higher education has increasingly competitive pressure in the last decade. Some colleges have been upgraded to be accredited universities while many universities established colleges to extend their graduate programs. To make sure that universities are marketable to current and potential customers, they have followed the management practice in a business sector and embraced the customer satisfaction perspective of TQM as a key to survival and retain competitive advantages in a higher education sector. Students are considered as customers because they have engaged in an economic agreement for buying educational services [8]. They, therefore, should be provided opportunities to express their needs and satisfaction with their learning environment. Educational institutions, on the other hand, attempt to delight their students like commercial customers. In the sense that "the customer is always right," instructors are expected to entertain students rather than challenge them to participate in classes. They try to avoid students' critical feedback that may have a detrimental impact on their promotional prospects [3,22]. In addition, student's expected grades and final course

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