Attitudes toward Student-Customer Concept: Educational Level, Institution Status and Interdisciplinary Studies

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ABSTRACT
The study explores student attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental and higher educations based on three units of analysis—educational levels (undergrad vs. graduate), institution status (public vs. private), and interdisciplinary (technology, engineering, and business). It also examines students’ opinions toward using the student-customer concept in higher education. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to answer the research questions. The quantitative analysis results indicate that, in overall, students disagree to use the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations. In particular, undergraduate students disagree to use the student-customer concept more than graduate students do. Students in public and private universities have no significant difference regarding their attitudes toward using the student-customer concept. Engineering students have negative attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in both fundamental and higher educations more than business and technology students have. The qualitative analysis results indicate that some students prefer the student-customer concept to be used in higher education as universities/colleges will improve their service quality for students. In contrast, most students perceive that using the student-customer concept in higher education will degenerate instructor’s attention and instructor-student relationship, alter the main objective of educational institutions, and negatively affect the society. The study reports the analysis results and discusses the findings, implications and limitations.

Keywords: education, student-customer, attitudes, educational level, interdisciplinary, institution status

1. INTRODUCTION
As a result of reduced government funding and increased competitiveness in the educational market, educational institutions are under constant review on the need of economic accountability and performance improvement. They have competed with one another to attack and retain students as well as regain trust from the public. Higher education institutions have reshaped their educational practices and adopted customer satisfaction perspective of total quality management (TQM) in the hope that it will be the key to survival as it happened in the business sector [1,15]. TQM is originally employed by businesses to improve organizational performance which aims to maximize levels of consumer satisfaction resulting in higher profitability for the organization. If educational institutions cannot meet customer (student) satisfaction, they would face bleak enrollment growth and financial problems [15]. Many educational institutions, therefore, adopt the students-customers concept as the organization’s policy and practice. It has been reported that the educational institution’s policy directly affects teaching-learning environment in classroom resulting in student competency and institution’s profitability [1,2,17,18].

Many academics are arguing the consequences of the student-customer concept in higher education under instructor perspectives [4,5,10,14]. Little or no research, however, has been empirically undertaken on the use of the student-customer concept in fundamental (primary/secondary) and higher (college/ university) educations under student perspectives, and investigated the effects of student characteristics (e.g., educational levels and major studies) on student attitudes toward using the student-customer concept in both educations. In addition, as the improper educational practices directed by the educational institution’s policy can lead to the diminished student competency [17,18], it is important to understand how students who are directly affected by the institution’s policy perceive the use of student-customer concept in their learning environment. Accordingly, this study aims to explore whether students agree to use the student-customer concept in fundamental and higher educations, and examines their perceptions regarding the effects of the student-customer concept on higher education.

The study addresses three following research questions. First, do student attitudes toward the student-customer concept significantly differ between higher education and fundamental education? Second, do student characteristics in terms of educational levels (undergraduate vs. graduate), institution status (public vs. private), and academic disciplines (business, technology, engineering) affect student attitudes toward treating students as customers in fundamental and higher educations? Third, why do students think higher education institutions (colleges/universities) should or should not treat students as customers? The first two research questions will be addressed by a quantitative data analysis while a qualitative data analysis will respond to the last research question.

The next sections provide literature review of the student-customer concept, research methodology, and analysis results. The discussions of the findings, implications and limitations of this study are provided subsequently.