



Factors affecting students' intentions to study at universities adopting the "student-as-customer" concept

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Abstract

Purpose – Competitive pressure and declining incomes in higher education have propelled many universities to increase the number of students admitted as a means of increasing their income, while the admitted students are regarded as "customers." The purpose of this paper is to examine students' beliefs regarding outcomes of the adoption of the student-as-customer concept and the interaction effects of these outcomes and the social influence on students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept and their intentions to study at universities adopting this concept.

Design/methodology/approach – The conceptual model was developed to investigate the interaction effects of the five outcomes of the student-as-customer concept's adoption – the universities' aim toward student satisfaction, the instructors' neglect of teaching, the impairment of instructor-student relationship, the ease of course achievement, and the improvement of universities' service quality and social influence on the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept, and their intentions to study at universities adopting this concept. Survey questionnaires were used to collect data from students studying at a large private university inclining to adopt the student-as-customer concept. The structural equation modeling technique was utilized for testing the proposed model.

Findings – The results indicate that students believe that the universities' adoption of the student-as-customer concept will lead to improvement of the universities' service quality and the degradation of educational quality in terms of the instructors' neglect of teaching, the impairment of instructor-student relationship, and the ease of course achievement. The improvement of service quality has a positive effect on the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept and their intentions to study at universities adopting this concept. The students' beliefs toward the degradation of educational quality, on the other hand, have indirect and negative effects on the students' intentions to study at universities adopting the concept. Interestingly, the effect of social influence on students' intentions to study at universities adopting the concept is greater than the effects of students' beliefs toward outcomes of the concept.

Originality/value – This study is among the first research to empirically investigate the factors affecting students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept and their intentions to study at universities adopting this concept. The paper fills the gap in the higher education literature and provides guidance for universities to consider and prepare for the consequences of the concept's adoption associated with the number of students who intend to study at their universities.

Keywords Higher education, Attitude, Relationship, Social influence, Educational policy, Intention, Educational quality, Student-as-customer

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Globalization and market pressure in the education sector have propelled higher education institutions to constantly review on the need of economic accountability and performance improvement. Many universities aim to increase the number of students admitted as a means of increasing their income while the admitted students are considered

as “customers.” They will face bleak enrollment growth and financial straits if they cannot meet student (as customer) satisfaction (Schwartzman, 1995). More universities are adopting the “customer” metaphor and treat their students as customers. They have followed the market consumption practices including student complaints and appeal processes, assessment of academics by students, and procedural flexibility for different groups of students (Sappey and Bamber, 2007). These practices will affect teaching and learning environment resulting in the student’s competency and university’s reputation (Sax, 2004; Sappey and Bamber, 2007; Huitt, 1995; McIlrath and Huitt, 1995). While more universities trend to accept the student-as-customer concept, the argument whether universities should treat their students as customers is equivocal. Even though students are not completely considered as customers, they have some roles as service receivers who use services from universities. It is necessary for service providers (universities) to ensure that service receivers (students) experience positive service encounters as service receivers will communicate negative experiences to others. Research in the service provision indicates that service receivers’ negative attitudes toward service providers not only influence a negative intention to use the service, but also affect their word-of-mouth efforts and complaining behaviors (e.g. White and Yu, 2005; Bougie *et al.*, 2003; Liljander and Strandvik, 1997). This causes extensive damage to service providers’ overall reputation.

Previous studies under educators’ viewpoints provide various arguments about the student-as-customer concept’s implementation in higher education institutions (e.g. Bajou, 2005; Clayson and Haley, 2005; Obermiller *et al.*, 2005; Pitman, 2000). Little research, however, has been empirically undertaken what students perceive toward outcomes of the student-as-customer concept’s adoption and how these outcomes affect their attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept. Furthermore, the unworthiness of an educational institution’s practices will lead to the diminished students’ knowledge and competency (Huitt, 1995; McIlrath and Huitt, 1995). If universities (service providers) understand the patterns that underlie the students’ (service receivers) attitudes and intentions to receive their services, it will allow the universities to anticipate their students’ needs and respond to them efficiently. It is, therefore, important to understand what students who are directly affected by the university’s management practices perceive the use of the student-as-customer concept in their learning environment and whether these perceptions influence their decisions to select the place for their studies. As individuals will adjust their attitudes with respect to others to whom they feel similar or important to them (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), the effect of social influence should be taken into account when considering students’ attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept.

This study aims to examine the students’ beliefs toward outcomes of the student-as-customer concept and the interaction effects of these outcomes and social influence on students’ attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept and their intentions to study at universities adopting the concept. This study fills the gap in higher education literatures and provides guidance for universities’ policy makers to be aware of the consequences of the student-as-customer concept’s adoption in terms of the number of students who intend to study at their universities.

The following sections discuss the student-as-customer concept in higher education and the theory underpinning the study model. The study hypotheses, research method, and data analysis then are discussed. The paper concludes with the discussions of the findings, the implications for theory and practice, and the limitations and future studies.

The student-as-customer concept in higher education

The student-as-customer concept is historical concurrence with total quality management (TQM) philosophy where the quality is defined in terms of customer satisfaction (Schwartzman, 1995). Businesses have applied TQM to improve their performance with an aim to provide services at higher level of consumer satisfaction and in turn enhance competitiveness and profitability. Higher education institutions have followed the management practice in the business sector and embraced the customer satisfaction perspective of the TQM as a key to survive in the higher education sector due to the reduction of government funding and the high competitive pressure (Sax, 2004; Schwartzman, 1995). Universities are competing with one another to attract and retain students. Their management practice is governed by consumer orientation and operation process is geared to student-as-consumer satisfaction. Applying the concept of customers to students might improve educational process such as improving service quality or taking students' needs into account. However, there is incompatibility between the business domain and the education domain; hence, the application of customer metaphor to education is struggled (Schwartzman, 1995). In addition, research in the service provision has a focus of the concept of customers as service receivers and produced a number of classifications of services that emphasize the service receiver's perspective (e.g. Chase, 1978; Grönroos, 2000; Kotler, 1980; Schmenner, 1986; Thomas, 1978; Vandermerwe and Chadwick, 1989), but researchers have not emphasized the concept of students (as customers) as service receivers. In addition, most research has focussed on the interactions between service receivers and service providers (Dallimore *et al.*, 2007; Svensson, 2004; Bagozzi, 2006; Petzer *et al.*, 2012) as well as on service receivers' experiences and assessment of service providers (e.g. Yu and Dean, 2001; Bolton, 1998; Liljander and Strandvik, 1997). This study, however, concerns with measuring the service receivers' perceptions prior to, as well as soon after, use the service from the service providers as an aid to understand students' (as service receivers) choice behavior whether to study at the universities (as service providers) adopting the student-as-customer concept.

Under the student-as-customer concept, educational institutions become producers and deliverers of services. They need to manage operations, monitor efficiency, and produce quality services that meet the student expectations (Clayson and Haley, 2005). Students' dissatisfaction with the university's services closely resembled complaints against the university's reputation. Educational institutions are urged to improve their service quality (e.g. the quality of student service and administrative service) to enhance student satisfaction closely corresponding to the TQM philosophy. They help students to obtain academic degrees quickly by establishing more campuses and offering many fast-track programs. Education is then seen as a commodity and more educational institutions become "McUniversities" providing fast foods (degrees) for customers (students) (Ritzer, 1998; Rooney and Hearn, 2000).

Students are considered as customers as they have engaged in an economic agreement of buying educational service (Kanji and Tambi, 1999). They pay their education costs; thus, they should be treated in the same way as any buyers of goods or services (Bajou, 2005; Kanji and Tambi, 1999). They are given an opportunity to express their wants and feedbacks about their learning environment (e.g. teaching quality and classroom facilities). They can make a purchase decision on the university's services and provide feedback either complaint or admiration to the university in the same way they purchase everyday products from the shops (Clayson and Haley, 2005). Furthermore, the student-as-customer concept undermines the student's sense of responsibility for their own learning (Lammers *et al.*, 2005). Students become passive consumers who pass the

responsibility of their learning on to instructors resulting in the disinclination to classroom participation (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Rolfe, 2002). They will shop for the most comfortable courses which are easy to pass assessment, and expect high grades regardless of the amount of efforts they put on their works. In addition, students' appraisal of teaching provides indirect control over instructors (Sappey and Bamber, 2007). Students may penalize demanding instructors through the critical feedback on teaching performance assessment (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

Instructors who have conflicts with students will trouble with their promotional prospect (Chonko *et al.*, 2002; Obermiller *et al.*, 2005). They are expected to please students rather than challenge them to participate in classes. In addition, instructors will see their students who attend a class with a purpose to acquire degrees rather than knowledge. They will focus on what students want (to pass the course) and pay little attention on what students need to learn from the course. Eagle and Brennan (2007) posits that the adoption of the "customer" metaphor in higher education can damage educator-student relationships. Students expect to have a good relationship with their instructors like family members and friends instead of seller-buyer relationship (Watjatrakul, 2012).

In summary, the student-as-customer concept associated with educational institutions, instructors, and students can be summarized in Table I.

Theory underpinning the study model

A widely known model for the prediction of behavioral intention derived from the social psychology is the theory of reasoned action (TRA). TRA suggests that an individual's behavior is driven by his/her intention, which in turn determined by his/her attitude toward the behavior and subjective norms (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

Key issues	"Student as Customer" concept	References
Rationale	Response to market pressure by adopting the total quality management (TQM) philosophy	Schwartzman (1995), Sax (2004), Clayson and Haley (2005)
Purpose	Maximize student satisfaction to inform service quality	Schwartzman (1995), Sax (2004)
Educational institution's roles	Acting as a service producer and deliverer Producing quality services and improving quality of existing services Assisting students to obtain degrees faster	Clayson and Haley (2005), Ritzer, 1998, Rooney and Hearn (2000)
Instructor's roles	Acting as a service provider Delighting students rather than involving participation Threatening curiosity and attention in teaching Degenerating instructor-student relationship	Clayson and Haley (2005), Eagle and Brennan (2007), Chonko <i>et al.</i> (2002), Watjatrakul (2012)
Student's roles	Acting as a passive consumer of the services Seeking the easiest courses and programs with soft assessments Transferring responsibility of their learning onto education providers	Bajou (2005), Kanji and Tambi (1999), Lammers <i>et al.</i> (2005)

Table I.
Summary of the
student-as-customer
concept

The effects of attitudes and subjective norms are not weighted equally in predicting behavioral intention and vary depending on the individual and situation (Miller, 2005). An individual's attitude toward behavior refers to his/her belief that particular behavior leads to a certain outcome and an evaluation of the outcome of that behavior. A subjective norm refers to an individual's perception of what others around them believe that the individual should do. In other words, an individual's intention to participate in any behavior is influenced by the people who are important to him/her (e.g. a peer group, family, coworkers). Subjective norms, however, capture the essence of social influence.

Social influence is defined as "change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors that results from interaction with another individual or a group" (Rashotte, 2007, p. 4426). It has been identified as social pressure or social norms and used the same measurement scales of subjective norm (Lee *et al.*, 2006; Hua and Haughton, 2009). The effect of social influence (operationalized by the scales of subjective norm) on individuals' intentions to behave is inconclusive (Lee *et al.*, 2006). For examples, Venkatesh and Davis (2000) found that social influence did not have a significant impact on an individual's intention to use business applications in the context of voluntary use. Venkatesh *et al.* (2003) discovered that social influence affected behavioral intention in the mandatory settings and in the early stages of experience. Watjatrakul (2013) found that social influence had a significant effect on users' intentions to use a voluntary service. Accordingly, this study uses the subjective norm to capture the essence of social influence and applies the fundamental constructs of TRA to develop the study model (Figure 1) associated with the theoretical hypotheses provided in the next section.

Hypotheses

The study first hypothesizes the interrelationships among students' beliefs toward outcomes of the student-as-customer concept. Subsequently, the effects of those outcomes and social influence on students' attitudes toward the student-as-customer concept and their intentions to study at universities adopting the concept are proposed.

Interrelationships among students' beliefs toward outcomes of the student-as-customer concept

Customers can choose the products/services they want and complain sellers if they are unsatisfied with those products/services. Similarly, if students (as customers) are not satisfied with the study results, they can penalize demanding instructors through their critical feedback on teaching performance and in turn affects instructor's career prospect (Sappey and Bamber, 2007; Clayson and Haley, 2005; Obermiller *et al.*, 2005). Instructors would delight their students to avoid any conflicts with their students resulting in a better teaching assessment from their students. They will teach their materials in disobliging and uninformative ways. Students who invest time and money

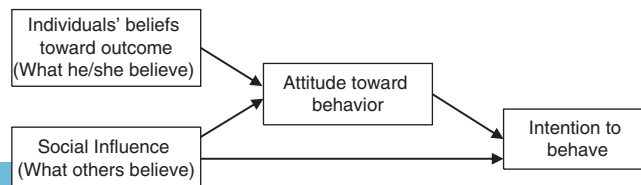


Figure 1.
Theory underpinning
the study

on their learning will discomfort to stay in such learning environment. The relationship between instructors and their students is then deteriorated. The more the instructors' neglect of teaching is, the higher the impairment of relationship between instructors and students will occur:

H1. Instructors' neglect of teaching will positively affect the impairment of relationship between instructors and students.

Universities adopting the student-as-customer concept are customer-oriented organizations where quality of their services is defined in terms of customer satisfaction (Schwartzman, 1995). The customer's judgment determines how quality is measured and the customer is always right. Universities that cannot meet student satisfaction will face bleak enrollment growth and financial crisis (Schwartzman, 1995). They would treat their students as customers and aim to enhance student satisfaction. Similar to the sellers who provide a quality service in exchange of their customer's money, universities receive payments from students; thus they are liable to offer a good service for their students. Furthermore, students attend universities with an aim to obtain a degree as a ticket of admission to their future careers. They are investing time and money with a purpose to use their educations to build careers and lives. Students as customers will avoid to study at the universities where they feel difficult and may not be able to graduate. Consequently, the universities will face bleak enrollment growth and financial straits. They might need to warrant the students' expectations, passing courses, and obtaining degrees. In summary, universities adopting the student-as-customer concept will improve their service quality and offer the courses that are easy to pass to enhance student satisfaction:

H2. University's aim toward student satisfaction will positively affect the improvement of universities' service quality and the ease of course achievement.

Effects of the students' beliefs toward outcomes and social influence on the students' attitudes and intentions

Students will worry about the relationship with their instructors if they are treated as customers of universities. Their relationship with instructors will become the business relationship which broadens the gap between students and instructors. Students desire their instructors to see them as family members or friends rather than the buyers of their services (Watjatrakul, 2012). Eagle and Brennan (2007) posits that the adoption of the "customer" concept in higher education damages educator-student relationships. Accordingly, students who perceive a worse relationship between instructors and students as a result of the adoption of the student-as-customer concept are unlikely to accept the concept:

H3. Impairment of relationship between instructors and students will negatively affect the students' attitude toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept.

Students who see themselves as customers will expect to get a better service in return for their education costs (Kanji and Tambi, 1999). Similar to their shopping for a quality product at stores, students can choose a university that can provide quality services (e.g. student and administrative services) or they can go elsewhere for a better service. Universities, on the other hand, will improve their service quality to attract and

retain students. Accordingly, if universities adopting the student-as-customer concept, students believe they can get a better service quality from the universities and hence have a positive attitude toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept:

H4. Improvement of university's service quality will positively influence the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept.

Students as customers will shop for the most comfortable courses which are easy to pass assessment, and expect good grades regardless of the amount of efforts they put on their works or the quality of work produced (Clayson and Haley, 2005). They will feel easy to pass their subjects and obtain a higher grade if they are treated as university's customers. Students who believe that they can easily graduate from the universities treating students as customers will more likely to accept the student-as-customer concept:

H5. Ease of course achievement will positively affect the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept.

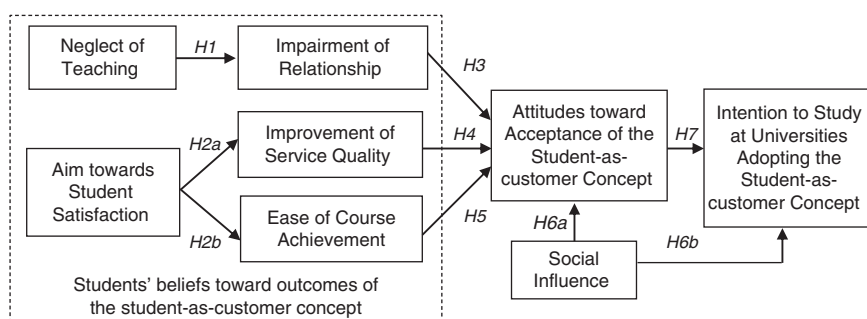
Previous research has shown that social influence denoting the subjective norm is very influential in explaining the adoption of innovation (e.g. Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Webster and Trevino, 1995; Hua and Haughton, 2009). People will adjust their beliefs/attitudes with respect to others to whom they feel similar or important to them. The influence of people such as friends, family members, coworkers will affect individual feeling and attitude toward behavior (Hua and Haughton, 2009). In addition, individuals' intentions toward adopting innovative products/services are positively related to the influence of their reference groups (Venkatesh and Morris, 2000; Teo and Pok, 2003). Accordingly, students' attitudes and behavioral intentions are relied on others who are important to them (a manifestation of social influence).

H6. Social influence will positively affect the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept and the students' intentions to study at the university adopting the student-as-customer concept.

Researchers have discussed the theoretical construct of attitude under TRA to identify the cause of intention for decades. For example, people's attitude toward using an innovative system is an antecedent of intention to adopt the system (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). There are extensive studies that explain the positive impact of people's attitudes toward behavior on their intentions to behave (e.g. Davis, 1989; Holsapple and Wu, 2008; Lee, 2009). Accordingly, students who have positive attitudes toward the student-as-customer concept will prefer to study at universities adopting this concept:

H7. Students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept will positively influence the students' intentions to study at universities adopting the student-as-customer concept.

Accordingly, the conceptual model derived from the interrelationships among the respective constructs associated with the hypotheses can be depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2.
Conceptual model

Method and data analysis

The study utilized a survey method to collect data from students studying at a large private university inclining to adopt the student-as-customer concept. A questionnaire was used as the research instrument. It consisted of three parts. The first part contained the statements aimed at addressing students' beliefs toward outcomes of the student-as-customer concept. The second part contained the statements measuring the remaining constructs of the study model including social influence, attitudes, and intentions. The last part requested for the demographic data of participants such as age, gender, and education. Participants were asked to indicate their agreements with the given statements in the first two parts (see Appendix) using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

The questionnaires were administered in classrooms with the assistance of class lecturers. In all, 318 students participated in this study. After going over the participants' response data, 300 questionnaires were usable for further analysis, giving a usable rate of 94 percent. The sample size of 300 is 15 times of the number of parameters (20 parameters) and greater than a "critical sample size" of 200; hence, it provides sufficient power for data analysis using the structural equation modeling (SEM) technique (Garver and Mentzer, 1999; Hoelter, 1983; Kline, 2005; Lei and Wu, 2007). Most respondents are undergraduate students (88.3 percent) and study in the business programs such as management, marketing, and financial programs (82.3 percent). A half of respondents are female (51.3 percent) and 65.3 percent of respondents aged between 20 and 25 years old. The SEM analysis technique from AMOS 18.0 was utilized to examine the data reliability and validities in the measurement model and investigate causal relationships among the constructs in the structural model discussed below.

Analysis of the measurement model

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test the measurement model. The measurement model's overall goodness of fit was examined before proceeding to assess the psychometric properties of the measurement model in terms of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Table II shows the common goodness of fit indices including the ratio of χ^2 to degree of freedom (df), goodness of fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), normalized fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). It indicated that all model-fit indices exceeded the acceptance levels suggested by previous studies (e.g. Hair *et al.*, 1998; Kline, 2005), demonstrating a fairly good fit with the data collected ($\chi^2/df = 1.378$, GFI = 0.940, AGFI = 0.911, NFI = 0.945, CFI = 0.984, IFI = 0.984, RMSEA = 0.036).

Reliability was estimated by a composite reliability of latent constructs. A composite reliability was assessed with the ratio of square of the summation of the factor loadings and the square of the summation of the factor loadings plus the summation of error variables: $(\sum \lambda_y)^2 / ((\sum \lambda_y)^2 + \sum \text{Var}(\epsilon_y))$ (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Factor loadings and error variables used for reliability analysis were presented in Table III. Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested the value of reliability should be above 0.6. Table IV indicated that all composite reliabilities were above the threshold confirming the acceptable reliability of the constructs.

Convergent validity was confirmed by looking at the average variance extracted (AVE): $\sum (\lambda_y)^2 / (\sum (\lambda_y)^2 + \sum \text{Var}(\epsilon_y))$ (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). AVE above the recommended 0.5 level indicated that at least one-half of the variances observed in the items were accounted for by their hypothesized factors (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Table IV indicated that the AVE value for each factor is above the 0.5 threshold, confirming the convergent validity of the measurement model.

Table II.
Fit indices for the measurement and structural models

Fit indices	Suggested value	Measurement model	Structural model
χ^2/df	≤ 3.00	1.378	1.576
GFI	≥ 0.90	0.940	0.924
AGFI	≥ 0.90	0.911	0.901
NFI	≥ 0.90	0.945	0.928
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.984	0.972
IFI	≥ 0.90	0.984	0.972
RMSEA	≤ 0.50	0.036	0.044

Table III.
Mean, factor loadings and error items

Constructs and items	Mean	Factor loadings	Variance of error items	Constructs and items	Mean	Factor loadings	Variance of error items
<i>Aim toward student satisfaction</i>				<i>Neglect of teaching</i>			
AtSS1	3.67	0.751	0.488	NoT1	2.86	0.684	0.650
AtSS2	3.55	0.718	0.553	NoT2	2.81	0.755	0.570
				NoT3	3.19	0.821	0.458
<i>Impairment of relationship</i>				<i>Social influence</i>			
IoR1	2.95	0.819	0.423	ScI1	2.36	0.898	0.205
IoR2	3.05	0.753	0.510	ScI2	2.32	0.906	0.197
<i>Improvement of service quality</i>				<i>Attitude towards the concept</i>			
IoSQ1	3.63	0.775	0.458	AtC1	2.57	0.884	0.297
IoSQ2	3.69	0.694	0.597	AtC2	2.51	0.921	0.211
				AtC3	2.63	0.819	0.479
<i>Ease of course achievement</i>				<i>Intention to study</i>			
EoCA1	2.70	0.814	0.518	IntS1	2.41	0.893	0.243
EoCA2	2.84	0.803	0.489	IntS2	2.35	0.908	0.204
EoCA3	2.87	0.856	0.355	IntS3	2.22	0.837	0.329

Discriminant validity was examined by comparing the shared variance between constructs with the AVE of the individual construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table IV indicated that the AVE of the individual constructs was greater than the shared variances between constructs in all cases, confirming the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Analysis of the structural model

The fit-model indices with their corresponding suggested values in Table III provided evidence of a good model fit of the structural model ($\chi^2/df = 1.576$, GFI = 0.924, AGFI = 0.901, NFI = 0.928, CFI = 0.972, IFI = 0.972, RMSEA = 0.044). The casual paths including standardized path coefficients and squared multiple correlations of endogenous variables (R^2) in the hypothesized model were presented in Figure 3.

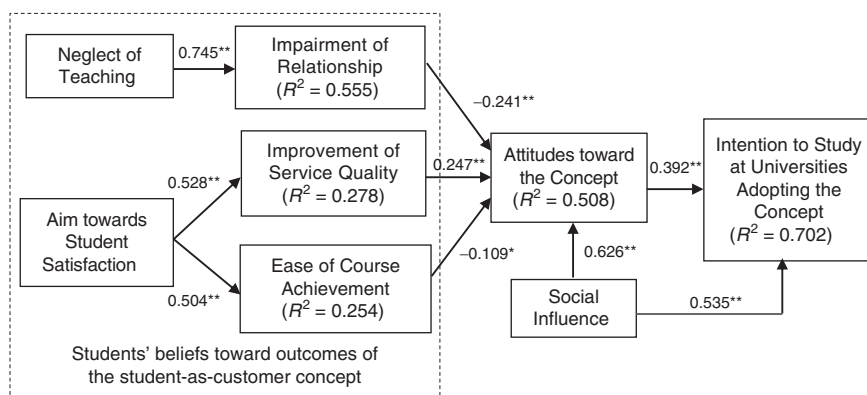
Discussion of the findings

The results shown in Table V indicate that male and female students do not have significant differences in their intentions to study at universities adopting the student-as-customer concept ($p > 0.05$). Similarly, students at the undergraduate level and graduate level do not have significant differences in their intentions to study at

	Reliability	AtSS	IoR	NoT	Sci	IoSQ	EoCA	AtC	IntS
AtSS	0.67	0.509							
IoR	0.73	0.030	0.570						
NoT	0.75	0.066	0.549	0.505					
Sci	0.89	0.000	0.050	0.037	0.802				
IoSQ	0.67	0.278	0.033	0.006	0.006	0.506			
EoCA	0.82	0.236	0.052	0.037	0.000	0.100	0.600		
AtC	0.87	0.001	0.150	0.102	0.433	0.085	0.004	0.700	
IntS	0.90	0.001	0.076	0.097	0.626	0.025	0.004	0.549	0.749

Table IV. Reliability, average variance extracted, and shared variance between constructs

Notes: Diagonal elements are the average variance extracted (AVE). Off-diagonal elements are the shared variances



Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

Figure 3. Final model

Table V.
Differences between
the sample means

Demographics	%	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> value	<i>t</i> -test <i>p</i> value
<i>Gender</i>					
Male	48.7	2.413	1.005	1.429	0.154
Female	51.3	2.251	0.960		
<i>Programs</i>					
Business	82.3	2.285	0.983	-1.725	0.086
Technology	17.7	2.541	0.970		
<i>Educational level</i>					
Undergraduate	88.3	2.311	0.995	-0.935	0.350
Graduate	11.7	2.476	0.898		

universities adopting the concept ($p > 0.05$). Furthermore, students' intentions to study at the universities adopting the student-as-customer concept do not have significant differences between students studying business program and technology program ($p > 0.5$).

Table IV indicates that if universities adopt the student-as-customer concept, students believe that universities will set the aim toward student satisfaction (Mean > 2.5); relationship between instructors and students will deteriorate (Mean > 2.5); the universities' service quality will improve (Mean > 2.5); they can easily pass the courses (Mean > 2.5); and instructors will neglect to teach their students (Mean > 2.5). In other words, students perceive the positive and negative outcomes of the universities' adoption of the student-as-customer concept. The adoption of the student-as-customer concept will enable the universities to improve their service quality for students (e.g. quality of teaching facilities and student support services), but degrade study quality in terms of the instructors' neglect of teaching (e.g. unrealized the importance of their teaching), the impairment of instructor-student relationship (e.g. difficulty of relationship retention), and the ease of course achievement (e.g. easy to pass exam and obtain a higher grade). The study indicates that the universities adopting the "student-as-customer" metaphor will aim to satisfy their students in the same way as businesses intend to satisfy their customers. The results also indicate that students' families and friends do not support students to accept the student-as-customer concept (Mean < 2.5). In addition, most students have neutral attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept (Mean = 2.5) and little intention to study at universities adopting the student-as-customer concept (Mean < 2.5).

Impact of the students' beliefs toward outcomes of the student-as-customer concept on the students' intentions

The result indicates that 70.2 percent of variance of students' intentions to study at universities adopting the student-as-customer concept can be explained by the purposive factors (Figure 3). As anticipated, the instructors' neglect of teaching positively affects the impairment of instructor-student relationship and in turn negatively affects the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept (*H1* and *H3* are supported). The university's aim toward student satisfaction has positive effects on the improvement of service quality and the ease of course achievement (*H2* is supported). The improvement of university's service quality, on the other hand, positively affects the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept (*H4* is supported). Furthermore, social influence

positively affects the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept and their intentions to study at universities adopting the concept (*H6* is supported). Finally, the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept positively influence their intentions to study at universities adopting the concept (*H7* is supported).

Surprisingly, the ease of course achievement has a negative effect on students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept (*H5* is not supported). In other words, students dislike the student-as-customer concept because this concept helps them to easily get a high grade and pass the course assessment. In fact, students do not want to pass the courses in exchange for their tuition fees or favorable course evaluations; instead, they want to see their truthful learning performance with a quality education. Boretz (2004) contends that students aim to succeed in their courses through the communal effort to support their learning. On the other hand, universities should have the grading policy that reflexes the quality of their students' learning performance.

Among the five outcomes of the student-as-customer concept's adoption, the improvement of universities' service quality, and the impairment of instructors-students relationship have higher impacts on the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the concept (Table VI). The former is influenced by the university's aim toward student satisfaction while the latter is a consequence of the instructors' neglect of teaching. Furthermore, the university's aim toward student satisfaction indirectly affects the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept through the positive influence of the improvement of service quality and the negative influence of the ease of course achievement.

In summary, the student-as-customer concept is conjunction with TQM philosophy where the customer satisfaction is its cornerstone. To enhance student satisfaction, higher education institutions should listen to their students on what students really want rather than what institutions or instructors expect. This empirical study suggests that students want their universities not only to improve their service quality but also to encourage instructor-student relationships and offer a quality education. If universities can satisfy the students' wants, students will have positive attitudes toward the student-as-customer concept and intend to study at universities adopting the concept.

Comparison of the impacts of social influence and students' beliefs on the students' intentions

Table VI shows that students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept are relied on social influence more than the students' beliefs toward outcomes of the concept – the university's aim toward student satisfaction, the instructors' neglect of teaching, ease of course achievement, the improvement of service quality, and the impairment of instructor-student relationship. In other words, students'

	AtSS	NoT	EoCA	IoSQ	IoR	ScI	AtC
EoCA	0.504						
IoSQ	0.528						
IoR	0.000	0.745					
AtC	0.075	-0.180	-0.109	0.247	-0.241	0.626	
IntS	0.029	-0.070	-0.043	0.097	-0.095	0.780	0.392

Table VI.
Total effects among the
respective constructs

attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept are relied on what others (families and friends) think rather than what they (students) think. Furthermore, social influence has the greatest impact on students' intentions to study at universities adopting the student-as-customer concept. In this light, students pay much attention on what their families' and friends' think about the student-as-customer concept when making a decision to study at the universities adopting this concept. The result, however, indicates that their families and friends are less likely to encourage students to accept the student-as-customer concept (Mean < 2.5; Table III).

Implications for theory and practice

This study has theoretical and practical implications. The implications for theory are threefold. First, this study is among the first research empirically investigated the students' beliefs toward outcomes of the student-as-customer concept's adoption and their consequences on the students' intentions to study at universities adopting the concept. Second, previous studies have explained the outcomes of the student-as-customer concept's adoption based on the educators' viewpoints (e.g. Bajou, 2005; Clayson and Haley, 2005). This study, on the other hand, proposed and empirically tested the five outcomes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept based on the students' viewpoints; namely, the instructors' neglect of teaching, the impairment of instructor-student relationship, the university's aim toward student satisfaction, the improvement of universities' service quality, and the ease of course achievement. Third, the study extends the prediction of the TRA in which social influence denoting the subjective norm significantly affects not only an individual's intention to behave but also his/her attitude toward performing behavior.

The practical implications are threefold. First, this study enables universities adopting the student-as-customer concept to understand the patterns that underlie the students' positive and negative intentions to study at the universities and hence anticipate their students' needs and respond to them more efficiently. According to the findings, the universities should improve their service quality as it is the only positive aspect that students agree to accept the student-as-customer concept resulting in the positive intention to study at the universities. They should improve the quality of their teaching facilities (e.g. functional classroom equipment and internet connection), student support services (e.g. registration, library, and technology supports), and staff proficiencies (e.g. administrators' capabilities and instructors' expertise). On the other hand, the universities should be aware of their students' negative aspects toward adopting the student-as-customer concept associated with the instructors' neglect of teaching, the impairment of instructor-student relationship, and the ease of course achievement. They should overcome the students' negative aspects toward the concept's adoption by encouraging instructors to pay more attention to their students' learning and bonding relationship between instructors and students. For instances, instructors should teach their materials in compelling and informative ways, promote students' participations in classes, and involve in student activities.

Second, the study indicates that social influence has the greatest impact on students' intentions whether to study at universities adopting the student-as-customer concept. The universities, therefore, can encourage students' intentions to study at their universities with the supports of others who are important to students. They should be able to convince not only students but also their families and friends to perceive the positive outcome of the student-as-customer concept (i.e. quality services).

For instance, universities might expose their quality services to students' parents and public by arranging some activities and events at their campuses.

Third, the study suggests that students are looking for a quality education. They do not attempt to have a passing grade in exchange for a favorable course evaluation without essential knowledge to work in the real world. Instructors should be aware of using "grade inflation" to raise the grades higher than previously assigned for given levels of students' achievement. The universities, on the other hand, should provide their grading policy that optimistically reflexes the quality of their students (e.g. grade verification system, students' feedback).

Limitations and future studies

The study provides some suggestions to improve on the study limitations. First, this study focusses on the students' beliefs toward the outcomes of the student-as-customer concept. Other stakeholders such as students' parents and administrative staff, however, are also affected by a university's practice toward the concept's adoption. Future studies examining other stakeholders' perspectives of the concept's outcomes are suggested to broaden an understanding of the consequences of the student-as-customer concept's adoption. Second, this study provides the important effect of the adoption of the student-as-customer concept in regard to the students' intentions to study at the university adopting the concept. However, others effects of the concept's adoption such as the educational quality and institution's reputation are also important for the university's policy makers to take into account before making the adoption decision of this concept. Future studies investigating how the adoption of the "student-as-customer" concept might lead to the debasement or improvement of educational quality and institutional reputation are suggested. Third, because the effect of attitude in predicting behavioral intention varies depending on the individual and the situation (Miller, 2005), a longitudinal study is suggested to track the changes of students' attitudes and intentions. Fourth, the study confines the analysis of some demographic data (see Table V). However, students studying in different academic programs and/or at public universities might have the different extent of intentions to study at universities adopting the student-as-customer concept. To improve the generalizability of the study model, future studies might apply the study model to test with students in different academic programs (i.e. education, art, humanities) and/or at public universities. Fifth, the study collects data from the on-campus students. Many universities currently offer the off-campus and/or e-learning programs to attract more students in concurrence with the student-as-customer concept. The management practices of the on-campus study and off-campus/e-learning study, however, are considerably differed. Future studies examining how the student-as-customer concept affects students' intentions to study at universities offering the off-campus and/or e-learning programs are suggested to broaden the result of this study.

Conclusion

The study proposes the model to investigate the interaction effects of the students' beliefs toward outcomes of the student-as-customer concept and social influence on the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept and their intentions to study at universities adopting this concept. The SEM technique was utilized for testing on the proposed model. The results indicates the five outcomes of the student-as-customer concept's adoption; namely, the universities' aim toward student satisfaction, the instructors' neglect of teaching, the impairment of instructor-student

relationship, the ease of course achievement, and the improvement of universities' service quality. The improvement of service quality has a positive effect on students' attitudes while the impairment of instructor-student relationship and the ease of course achievement have negative effects on students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept and in turn positively affect their intentions to study at universities adopting the concept. In addition, the university's aim toward student satisfaction indirectly affects the students' attitudes toward acceptance of the student-as-customer concept through the positive influence of the improvement of service quality and the negative influence of the ease of course achievement. Interestingly, the study finds that social influence has more impact on the students' intentions to study at universities adopting the student-as-customer concept than the students' beliefs toward outcomes of the concept. This study suggests that if universities are pushed to adopt the student-as-customer concept as a result of an increased market pressure in higher education, they should carefully adopt the term "customers" to refer to students by means of retaining the students' favorable outcome of the concept – the improvement of the university's service quality, while avoiding the potentially unfavorable outcomes – the instructors' neglect of teaching, the impairment of instructor-student relationship, and the ease of course achievement.

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Appendix

Questions	Code
<i>If the university treats me as a customer</i>	
My university will aim to satisfy me as I am its customer	AtSS
The university's policy is tailored to enhance student satisfaction	AtSS
I can get more attention from administrative persons when using their services	IoSQ
The quality of teaching facilities will be improved	IoSQ
I feel easy to pass my subject	EoCA
I can easily get a satisfied result for my studies	EoCA
Instructors will give a good grade for everyone	EoCA
The relationship between me and my instructors will grow worst	IoR
It is difficult to keep a close relationship with my instructors	IoR
My instructors do not see the importance of their teaching	NoT
My instructors will not care about me	NoT
My instructors do not mind what I learn in classes	NoT
<i>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</i>	
Generally, I find the student-as-customer concept is a good thing	AtC
I like the student-as-customer concept	AtC
I like my university to treat me like its customer	AtC
My family and friends will regard me as a smart student if I agree with the student-as-customer concept	ScI
My family and friends will regard me as a visionary if I accept the student-as-customer concept	ScI
I will apply to study at the university that treats students as customers	IntS
I will definitely study at the university adopting the student-as-customer concept in the future	IntS
The university that treats students as customers is a target of my study	IntS

Table AI.
Questions identifying
the study constructs

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