SINGAPORE: They are already preparing to study at a campus in the heart of the city. Now students of the Singapore Management University (SMU) may be able to live there as well.

SMU's provost, Professor Tan Chin Tiong, told TODAY that the Government will allocate several old Housing Development Board (HDB) blocks to SMU - "in the vicinity" of its new campus - to convert into residential facilities.

Later this month, SMU will start the move from its current location in Bukit Timah, where it has been operating since 2000, to a new $430-million facility in Bras Basah.

While these dormitories are most likely to appeal to SMU's international students, they will also be made available to Singaporeans who want to live near the campus.

Said Prof Tan, 56: "The Government is giving us different blocks of old HDB flats to renovate into residential and dormitory space. We are going to get quite a few of those to refurbish."

He harked back to how SMU had received negative feedback in 2003 when it had announced plans to build a 300-bed hostel in Jurong West, a 10-minute walk from the Lakeside MRT station. The main complaint was the distance between that location and the city campus.

At that time, SMU ruled out the possibility of a hostel near the city campus because land there was expensive and the high rental costs would be a concern for students.

"We had negative remarks (in the media) so we decided to kill that project," said Prof Tan. "Instead, the Government is giving us a few plots of HDB flats in the city. It will be interesting; for one of the plots (in particular), it will be very interesting."

While Prof Tan did not wish elaborate on the exact locations of the flats and the HDB and the Urban Redevelopment Authority could not comment at press time, players in the real estate business were willing to hazard educated guesses on the possible locations for the new dormitories.

Said Mr Wallace Chu, research manager for property adviser FPDSavills: "It won't be very far from the campus, that's for sure. Some locations I can think of are the old flats at Middle Road; Prinsep Street; and the Bugis and Selegie Road areas. There are also some old blocks behind Sim Lim Square; it could be any of these."

Property research consultant Nicholas Mak, however, is willing to put his money on the blocks of flats at Bras Basah Complex along North Bridge Road. "It's within walking distance, and it will appeal to the majority of students. I don't think rental costs will be high, because, after all, the leasing will be restricted to students," he said.

"The key consideration (for SMU) is to make the hostels accessible and affordable." - TODAY