SMU food outlets hungry for customers

Students find prices too high, office crowd not aware of eateries

By JANE NG

FOR the past two months, there has been a new lunchtime hangout in the city boasting four cafes and one foodcourt. The problem is, nobody seems to know it is there — and those that do are not spending much money.

Following the old marketing adage that it is all about location, several eateries set up shop at Singapore Management University, with the idea that they would draw not only students, but also the Bras Basah office crowd.

The reality so far has been a little different. The students say prices are too high and the office workers do not seem to realise the eateries exist. The four cafes and one foodcourt — located within school buildings or underground — have been open for nearly two months, but most are now struggling to survive because the only lunchtime crowd they see is made up of students keeping an eye on their wallets.

The worst-hit are the higher-end or Western food outlets.

At Italian eatery Olive Bistro, manager Tricia Lee has dropped menu prices twice since she opened just over a month ago. After the first week, prices for main courses like pasta went down by a dollar to $7. Now they are just over $5.

But that's still about double what students in other universities pay for a meal — although the choice may be more limited.

"Students can't expect the usual school canteen prices in town. With the high rental, we can't afford to subsidise the food further," said Ms Lee, 31, whose outlet says its prices are too high and the food is made up of mainly students keeping an eye on their wallets.

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Property consultancy Jones Lang Lasalle, which got the tenants for SMU, said this is lower than that paid by tenants in prominent shopping centres in town.

While Ms Lee's eatery is visible from the main road, other tenants complain that it is a case of "out of sight, out of mind".

Some of the food outlets, including a Kopitiam foodcourt, are located along an 800m underground walkway that links five of the six buildings and stretches across the 4.5ha campus. There are 10 entry points to the tunnel in the city, but most are not prominently located.

Also, gantry points blocking public access to classrooms have created the impression that the university is closed to the public, said one tenant.

Mrs Adele Wong, 37, who runs the Western cuisine stall with her brother at the Kopitiam foodcourt, said she has lost $8,000 in the past month.

"There is no signage telling people we exist. There is no breakfast or dinner crowd and this place is dead on weekends. I've had two Sundays where I had not a single customer," she said.

Even the student crowd she gets is limited because they say her prices are too steep, even after a 20 per cent discount. They pay $4.40 for a plate of spaghetti or $5.20 for a plate of fish and chips.

Responding to the tenants' concerns, an SMU spokesman said that the university is organising fortnightly talks for the public and events such as the Singapore Art Show to draw in customers. He also expects more customer flow once the retail and F&B space in the concourse is fully occupied.

SMU is using about 4 per cent, or 40,000 sq ft, of the campus for retail and food outlets. So far, 80 per cent of that space has been booked, with half of the tenants already operating.