The ‘mall’ comes to SMU campus

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IT IS not quite the sort of university campus Singaporeans have come to know.

There are the school buildings, the library and the expected food outlets, of course.

But how about two beauty boutiques, a moneychanger and an optical shop, among others?

With the increasing number of retail outlets appearing on – and under – its grounds, the Singapore Management University is beginning to grow into its city campus mould.

Although it is bound by the same regulations on commercial space as the other two local universities in Singapore – no more than 5 per cent of the campus – SMU has attracted a mix of tenants that would not be out of place in a shopping centre.

Perhaps, the most eye-catching of the lot is the opening of two outlets by the L’Oreal Group to carry two of its signature brands, Biotherm and Maybelline.

And the cosmetics company is not in it just for the money – at least not yet.

While its Biotherm line may be a little pricey for students, the idea is to get a head start with its future customers.

“They are young and may not know how to take care of their skin. And there are so many products out there. We want to make them feel at home. Because we are in their school, they may not feel intimidated, say, by huge counters and salesgirls charging at them,” said a L’Oreal spokesperson.

What also helped the company to clinch a place at the Bras Basah campus was its offer to collaborate with SMU on the university’s “Finishing Touch” programme, which is designed to prepare students for the work place.

L’Oreal was not the only company to offer SMU such a deal. Others had done the same thing when they were jostling to get selected as tenants.

The UOB and OCBC banks have two branches at the university’s basement concourse, at which students will get a chance to learn the ropes of banking management, said SMU director of finance Sim Teow Hong.

Mr Sim also sits on the university’s retail leasing committee, which selects the tenants with help from their consultants, Jones Lang LaSalle.

The property consultancy did a survey among students, staff and the office crowd near the campus to gauge the type of services needed.

While food naturally came out on top and attracted a lot of bids, said Ms Pauline Tan, its associate director of retail, the company was surprised by some of the trades that wanted to set up shop at SMU.

“We had a lot of money-changers knocking on our door. We didn’t know where they suddenly came from,” she said with a laugh.

In the end, SMU chose one because, as Mr Sim put it, “students do travel”.

The other tenants include Watsons, publications vendor Buzz Kiosk, the Wywy phone shop and NTUC Medicare and Denticare.

There will also be two 7-Eleven outlets.

The objective of SMU, said Mr Sim, is not to create a revenue-spinner, but to provide the necessary services to its staff and students. And since it is a public-access campus, Jones Lang has ensured the services do not duplicate others located nearby.

For example, although SMU received more than three bids to open a food court as the anchor tenant, it did not select the highest bid. In the end, it decided that Kopitiam would be a good partner.

So far, about 80 per cent of the 50,000 sq ft of commercial space has been snapped up, at an average of $7 per square foot.

Jones Lang is still looking for “interesting” trades for its client. One thing that is missing for sure, said Ms Tan, based on its survey of the students, is a fast-food restaurant.