Tertiary students are spending as much time on their looks as on their books.
A cid-bleached ripped jeans and tatty dreadlocks. Oversized T-shirts and customised trucker hats. Off-shoulder tops and neon-striped tights.

This isn’t the dress code of ravers on a night out at St James Power Station, but outfits spotted on the campuses of Singapore’s tertiary institutions.

Sure, flip-flops and boring faculty T-shirts are the uniform of a handful of university and polytechnic students.

But for almost everyone else, looking good while hitting the books is a matter of course.

Says Adalia Jillian Frances, 19, a new media student at Republic Polytechnic who sports a Dior bracelet and Guess handbag: “Sometimes, even I feel that the students at my school look like they are attending a fashion show instead of school.”

Her own reason for putting on the ritz? “I believe that even the simplest girl in school would make some effort to look good because you never know who you might meet,” she titters.

Singapore Management University (SMU) does not have a dress code. But the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and most polytechnics have student handbooks that stipulate that improper attire, such as revealing shorts, bedroom attire, clothes with indecent words or pictures and slippers for domestic use are forbidden.

Margaret Chan, former actress and assistant professor of SMU’s theatre/performance studies, observes that campus style has become more dapper over the past few years.

“It’s a reflection of the level of self-confidence of students today,” says Chan, who is supportive of students taking care of their looks.

“In my time, vanity would have been frowned upon. But today, there is more emphasis on personal image. The mass media has a lot to do with it, being focused on a lot of beautiful people.”

For example, the cast of high school TV shows such as One Tree Hill look like they have just stepped out from the pages of a fashion magazine.

American talk-show host Oprah Winfrey even included a beauty salon in the US$40 million ($60.8 million) South African girls’ school that she funded, on the basis of teaching self-confidence through self-love.

Another reason that students are upping the style stakes is the availability of trendy togs that don’t cost several months’ pocket money.

The invasion of high-street giants like Topshop, Mango and Zara in the early noughties has seen a gradual rise in the number of students who look as good as – or even better than – their grades.

“I shop at these stores because their clothes are inexpensive but stylish,” says Chiam Hui Ting, 21, an information systems student at SMU who spends less than $100 per month on clothes.

Fashion chain stores have also seen more students shopping at their outlets.

Topshop’s brand manager Geraldine Goh says: “More students in uniforms have been coming here to shop in the last two years.”

Yet another factor for a preened student body is the close proximity to boutiques, especially since several retailers have set up shop on campus.

For example, casual-wear chain Giordano and cosmetics chain Sasa have planted stores at Nanyang Polytechnic in Ang Mo Kio, while streetwear chain 77th Street and Maybelline New York have a branch each at ITE College East in Simei and SMU in Bras Basah respectively.

Grace Tan, product manager of Maybelline New York which opened the SMU outlet in February last year, says: “We heard about the plans to build a new SMU campus in town so we opened our make-up school there to coincide with it.”

In recent years, students like Republic Polytechnic’s Frances have taken to picking out new threads in the comfort of home – via the Internet.

“I shop online so that the possibility of having the same outfit as someone else is slim,” she says.

But quick access to affordable threads does not spell instant flair for fashion.

Says Joanna Lim, founder and chief image coach of image consultancy Image Success: “Creativity and sense of colour and style are largely innate, and some people are more creative than others in mixing clothing, accessories and make-up.

“But students today are more exposed to magazines both online and in print, so they are more fashionable as a whole, experimenting by adopting the styles they see.”

While some parents like Chiam’s mother tut-tuts that kids these days spend more time in the fitting room than the library, other grown-ups have no objections to teens schooled in style.

Wilson Mack, a counsellor who works with families and youths at the Eagles Mediation and Counselling Centre in Boon Tat Street, says there is nothing wrong with dressing up because teens want to be affirmed by their peers.

“But it’s up to parents to convey the message that self-belief should stem from other qualities besides external appearances,” he says.

Dressing to impress also becomes a problem when students are so distracted by looking good that they neglect their studies, he adds.

Still, Republic Polytechnic lecturer Soh Ee Suan encourages his students to dress up.

“It’s healthy to let them express themselves through avenues like fashion when they’re young,” says Soh, who teaches a new media course and regularly spots girls in loud togs, reminiscent of their peers in Tokyo’s Harajuku district, and boys wearing eyeliner to class.

“It makes the school experience more interesting,” he observes.

“It beats having everyone walk around in drab shirts tucked into pants.”

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School of style

Photographers: DESMOND FOO, LIM WUI LIANG & MELISSA HO; Stylist: KENNY LOHWEY; Hair & make-up: MYE HUEY (mobile: 9387-5704);
Models: (from left) AZZAH FARHAN, DANIEL HUSSAIN & MELISSA SOH

ON AZZAH: Grey checkered dungarees, $106; green poplin bomber jacket, $79; light grey opaque tights, $23; belt, $23; blue Mary Jane shoes, $133; all from Topshop
ON DANIEL: Dark blue tee, $79; red tee, $79; grey checkered bermudas, $169; all from Ben Sherman. White suspenders, $29; grey belt, $23; both from Topman. White leather-and-suede ballets, $119; fuchsia long-sleeved blouse, price unavailable; both from Lacoste
ON MELISSA: Grey knee-length playsuit, $115; yellow blouse, $59; dark grey knee-length ribbed tights, $16; vermilion Mary Jane shoes, $133; blue tartan print belt, $49; grey plastic bangle, $25; all from Topshop. Orange jacket, $179, from Zara