SMU team a shoe-in for design ingenuity

By JENNANI DURAI

FLYING high one minute, down to earth the next – all without changing shoes.

A new type of hybrid shoe may soon be in stores, if an idea by a group of Singapore Management University (SMU) undergraduates takes off.

The six first-year students have designed a pair of shoes that allow the wearer to unscrew the heels and turn them into flats.

Called Feels – a combination of flats and heels – the idea has already caught the eye of shoe retailers such as Charles & Keith, U.R.S. & Inc, PrettyFit and Aldo, which have expressed interest in the idea.

The shoe design was in response to a real need, as female students lugging a pair of flats along with heeled shoes to school are a common sight.

Ms Beetsma Diana, 19, a team member, said: “We need heels for our presentations, but take flats along because heels hurt too much to wear for a long time. So we started wondering why something like this was not already on the market.”

The group conducted market analyses, hosted focus group discussions and created several prototypes.

They found convertible shoes sold overseas from the Internet, but they made use of complicated mechanisms and cost hundreds of dollars, she said.

“Another version also did not fully conceal the heel, which we didn’t think looked nice, and we had concerns about the safety of the mechanism. So we decided to create one where the heel could be removed completely,” she said.

The hardest part was figuring out the prototype. She said the group tried many different models before settling on one with a screw, and an elastic band in front. This way, the arch is flexible after the heel is removed.

Retailer interest has been encouraging. “It’s exciting that they are interested, and we feel encouraged to keep going and find investors,” she said.

The project was an eye-opener for Mr Darren Sim, 23, one of two men on the team. “It was a little uncomfortable at first, especially visiting all the lingerie shops for market research, but we soon got used to it,” he said.

There were some unexpected perks, too: “Now my female friends are impressed by how much I know about bras.”

Professor Soon Loo, who teaches the module, said he runs the course to expose students to the process of innovation. “What we need is more people who will say, ‘There’s a solution and I will find it,’ rather than just accept things the way they are,” he said.

Most of the students had been in the university for less than 60 days, he added. “Already, their resourcefulness has been tested. We want them to know from an early stage what they are capable of.”