

Cheaper food draws public

This and other public facilities at polys help maximise their usage

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WHEN delivery driver Muhammed Faizal, 28, wants to withdraw money near his home, he crosses the road to Republic Polytechnic (RP). The school in Woodlands allows members of the public to use its ATMs.

"It's really convenient and nearer to my home than Causeway Point, the closest shopping mall," Mr Faizal said.

The ATMs on campus are just one of the many RP facilities and businesses that are open to the public.

You can enjoy a meal at one of their cafes, rent one of their dance studios for rehearsals, and even enrol your children in their childcare centre. (See report below.)

The other four polytechnics also have a variety of facilities that the public can use.

The Straits Times reported earlier this month that private businesses at the Institute of Technical Education's (ITE) College West in Choa Chu Kang were struggling to keep afloat.

Is public using facilities?

So are members of the public using the facilities at the polytechnics and patronising the businesses there?

An RP spokesman told The New Paper that the school sees an average of 250 members of the public visiting the campus daily.

He added that RP's performing arts centre, established in 2007, is booked up to 200 days a year by members of the public. The remaining days are reserved for curriculum use or RP's internal events.

Mr C Pannirselvam, director of Singapore Polytechnic's (SP) Department of Estates & Development, said the performance venues at the school are "very popular" with members of the public too.

"Bookings are received many months in advance," he said.

But perhaps what is most popular are the food outlets at the polytechnics.

One reason is convenience.

Mr Toh Hock Guan, 59, a stall assistant at a Chinese food outlet at Temasek Polytechnic (TP), said his stall is patronised by joggers after their morning runs at Bedok Reservoir, which is near the school.

At Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP), food stallholders say they get Anderson Junior College students going there for lunch. The JC is just across the road from NYP.

Residents in HDB estates close to SP at Dover Road said they too used to eat at the polytechnic's canteens.

Said property agent Chua Li Li, 38: "Before more food places sprang up in this area, it was convenient to go to SP's canteens to eat."

Many of the canteens, foodcourts and fast food outlets on campus also offer relatively cheaper food than outside.

The McDonald's outlets in NYP and SP, for example, offer food for members of the public at lower prices than most of their outlets outside.

Some polytechnics such as TP also offer full-service restaurants that provide fine dining at reasonable prices.

The ToP Table at TP offers three-course meals for less than \$15.

When The New Paper was there two weeks ago during lunch hour, we saw members of the public among the customers.

Ms Winnie Cheong, 62, an artist, was there with her ex-colleagues for lunch.

"It's my first time here. The food is good and value for money," she said.

She said she paid about \$12 for her meal, which "would have cost her up to \$50" if she had dined in a restaurant serving food of a similar standard.

But some people were not aware that they could use facilities in the polytechnics.

Sounding surprised, university student Sarah Lim, 22, said: "Really? I didn't know we could go in there to eat."

Marketing experts said they have been seeing a trend of schools having facilities open to the public.

But they added that whether the facilities are well-used depends on location, followed by concerns about price and competitive advantage over neighbouring facilities.

Said Associate Professor Seshan Ramaswami from the Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business: "Location, location, location."

"Frequent or repeat-use facilities usually draw people only from the immediate neighbourhood, or within a reasonable commuting distance."

Associate Professor Ang Swee Hoon, from the National University of Singapore Business School, Department of Marketing said the facilities would have to be unique, "so that the public will make the effort to go to the campus".

- Additional reporting by Noor Ashikin Abdul Rahman, Foo Jie Ying and Jennifer Dhanaraj



VALUE FOR MONEY: (Above) One of the stores within Nanyang Polytechnic's campus retail mall. (Left) A group of ex-colleagues dine at The ToP Table, one of the eateries at Temasek Polytechnic. It costs less to dine in poly food outlets.

PICTURES: KUA CHEE SIONG, NANYANG POLYTECHNIC