By Jane Ng

Although it is set to open next year, the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) is off to a good start, having attracted top-calibre students, faculty and industry partners, Education Minister Ng Eng Hen said yesterday.

He told MPs that it had, for instance, attracted students from the top 10 per cent of the student population in its last two admission exercises.

The SUTD, which counts Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Zhejiang University in China as its collaborative partners, also recruited faculty staff from top foreign universities, including Cambridge and Harvard.

Seven of them are now at MIT to design a customised curriculum for the university – the fourth here, and which will focus on technology and design in the disciplines of engineering, information systems and architecture.

Dr Ng was replying to questions from two MPs during a debate on the legislation which provides for its establishment.

Mrs Josephine Teo (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC), who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education, asked if the university’s graduates would be prepared for global competition; while Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah GRC) wanted to know how the university planned to attract its fair share of talented students and faculty.

Replied, Dr Ng said the university was “off to a good start”. “How do we know it will succeed? The intermediate marker is the type of students that apply,” he added before detailing that it had attracted staff internationally.

Industry heavyweights such as IBM, Google and Deutsche Bank have also agreed to work with the university – either to fund internships or to allow graduates to join their companies for exposure, Dr Ng said.

Apart from industry tie-ups, he also announced that the university was in talks with the Singapore Management University (SMU) to look into collaborations in educational programmes.

They could work together to offer student exchanges, joint research projects, elective courses, co-curricular activities or even share facilities.

SUTD, whose curriculum will focus on technology and design has decided not to develop a business school but will instead “weave management, business and entrepreneurship into the curricular and co-curricular offerings”, its spokesman told The Straits Times yesterday when asked about the talks with the SMU.

In Parliament, Mr de Souza wanted to know how the university planned to differentiate itself from others, both local and overseas.

Dr Ng said SUTD’s plan to amalgamate the disciplines of information systems, architecture and engineering, for instance, was a novel concept.

“It’s not been done in any university that I know of,” he said.

The Government previously announced plans to expand the university sector and said that by 2015, some 30 per cent of each cohort of students will go on to study in university. This is compared to 1980, when 8 per cent of the cohort made it to university. The proportion went up to 26 per cent last year.

Dr Ng said that while the university sector was being expanded, quality and innovation remained key guiding factors – not the number of places.

Apart from SUTD, other new tertiary options announced in the last two years include the Singapore Institute of Technology – set up to provide niche degree courses through tie-ups with reputable overseas institutions; the Nanyang Technological University’s Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine; new degree programmes at arts institutions Nafa and LaSalle; and the liberal arts Yale-NUS College which was launched yesterday.

While the tuition fees at the SUTD will be higher, Dr Ng gave an assurance that financial aid options, including loans and bursaries, will be available for needy students.