THE Nanyang Technological University (NTU) should strive to be a knowledge node along the modern 'silk road', given its established East-West connections and partnerships with top overseas institutions from the region and beyond.

Education Minister suggested this on Tuesday when he urged NTU to leverage on its valuable assets it has built up in the last 30 years, and seek to distinguish and differentiate itself.

Dr Ng said while the silk road of the past served as a network of trading routes for items such as essentials and luxury goods, the 'goods' of today represent a continuous flow of knowledge nodes attracting wealth and talent.

He was speaking at the opening of the NTU's new school of physical and mathematical sciences building on Tuesday morning.

While commending the university for its achievements so far, Dr Ng also called on NTU to capitalise on its strengths to produce distinctive graduates who are both 'technologically sophisticated and business savvy' in its next lap.

'The interface between engineering and business can be richly exploited, which NTU is well-positioned to venture into,' said the minister, who then cited the impact of Apple's iPhone on Nokia, the market leader's share of the US$50 billion (S$72 billion) market for smartphones, to underline his point.

'According to Gartner Inc, a leading industry research company, Nokia's share of worldwide smartphone sales fell to 41.2 per cent in the first quarter from 45.1 per cent in the year-earlier period, while Apple's doubled to nearly 10.8 per cent,' he said.

'The winning proposition for Apple lies not only in a superior software, but also in its ability to innovate, identify market gaps and opportunities, and create a compelling product well-known for its sleek design and user-friendly applications.'

Dr Ng said in the area of research and innovation, NTU can further build on its current capabilities and continue to invest in cutting-edge scientific research and revolutionary technological innovations across multiple disciplines.

Given the significant headway it has made with the opening of the Earth Observatory of Singapore and the Nanyang Environment and Water Research Institute, he said they will further boost NTU's standing as a premier research-intensive university, and inspire greater scientific breakthroughs and technological advances.