Guess who rubbed shoulders with Airbus?

AMONG the throngs of middle-aged men and women in business suits, a group of fresh-faced exhibitors stood out.

No less immaculately dressed, these students from local and American universities drew curious stares from behind their booth at the ongoing Asian Aerospace show.

As the only students among the 900-odd exhibitors, this group of nine Singaporeans and a Malaysian is a curiosity at a show hosting big boys like Boeing and the European Aeronautical Defence and Space Group.

Said Ms Ong Soh Teng, 21, a final-year electrical engineering student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: “The experience is great, although there were some visitors who initially thought we were exhibiting a school project.”

But far from being overawed, the youngsters were relishing the chance to meet the industry’s bigwigs and showcase their invention – an underwater craft that can also be air-deployed and configured for military, commercial and research uses.

A handful of companies and the Singapore Navy expressed interest in the product, which is pending a patent in the United States, said Ms Ong.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University’s Jonathan Hung, who heads the team, said it was attending the show hoping to find partners and clients. The team was also looking for investors to build a life-sized prototype.

The students spent just over US$1,000 ($1,600) on their project while Mr Hung’s university and the Enterprise Florida spon-

sored the US$8,000 exhibition booth.

Mr Hung, 24, a final-year aerospace science student, said the team started conceptualising the project last September. Despite being geographically separated, they managed to work by communicating through emails and allocating jobs effectively. Within three months, they started testing their product.

He added: “The students in the United States took care of the engineering aspect while those based in Singapore were in charge of the marketing.”

Singapore Management University’s Wesley Teo, 23, said that the team members knew each other from previous projects.

Added Mr Hung: “This is the first airshow we are attending and we hope to attend the Farnborough airshow next July. But before that, we need put the product through advance testing.”

— LOH CHEE KONG