

AN entire hall filled with students and vice-chancellors erupted in cheer, as a young student stood up to voice his disappointment with the current state of higher education.

"We students don't just want a certificate, we want to be inspired!"

Perhaps it is the idealism of youth, but the youth forum was easily the liveliest of the lot. Passionate outbursts like above were common, with outspoken youth delegates questioning the status quo and demanding change.

Even more importantly, they were willing to enact actions to reflect their grand words.

"I actually led a petition to get the voice of the youth heard during the opening ceremony," said Malaysian youth representative Ganesh Mahendranathan.

"But we were told that there was no space for us.

"It was interesting that they could fit in multiple choir and dance performances," mused the first year accounting and finance student at Nilai University College.

That aside, the overall response to the forum was favourable.

Kenyan youth delegate Serah Kanyua was glad that students had the chance to facilitate workshops.

"That was great, as we can take back those skills to run workshops and programmes in our home countries."

For Hussein K Nsamba of Nigeria, the forum provided a space for interaction with like-minded people from all corners of the world.

"The views exchanged gave way for new ideas on how to improve the current situation," said the Universiti Putra Malaysia chemical engineering student.

"Plus, we got to meet our policy-makers instead of limiting sessions to just among

Young guns



ZANELO: Youth should have more time with their ministers.

ourselves."

However, some wished that government officials had made more time for them.

"We had productive meetings with two Commonwealth ministers, but I would have liked more face-time with more ministers," said South African delegate Zanelo Bikitsha.

"They are the ones who can give life to our ideas."

After much debate, a total of 140 youth delegates reached a consensus on the major problems plaguing the current education system.

These issues were set out in an official statement, which was presented to the



SERAH: Skills picked up at the conference will be useful back home.

education ministers at the conference. The recommendations listed down were that governments must actively involve youth in their policy-making processes, and need to encourage holistic learning instead of merely focusing on academics.

Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah said that he was impressed with the participants as they were serious about making a difference.

"There has been a shift in the collective mindset of young people; instead of seeing themselves as mere beneficiaries of the system, they are now coming forward to contribute as well."

Antigua and Barbuda's Youth Ambassador to the Commonwealth Jameel Lee agreed, saying that the shift



Ganesh (right) receiving a token of appreciation from Saifuddin at the conference.

occurred when reviewing the statements of previous conferences.

"A lot of them read like wish lists and were a bit much to be accomplished in a short time period.

"This year, we wanted to outline a few main issues that we can solve, and then build upon them in subsequent meetings."

Commonwealth Youth Programme director Dr Fatiha Serour said that governments need to create space for and value youth contribution.

"There needs to be meaningful engagement, not just discussions. This means the ministers' promises need to translate into policies and resources for young people."

With such weighty agendas

cramped in a space of four days, one wonders how the young delegates coped.

"I only had three hours of sleep a day!" exclaims Ganesh.

"What kept me going was adrenaline and the passion of the other delegates."

While adrenaline might be enough to fuel great ideas, is there a danger of this energy fizzling out now that the conference is over?

"We (the youth delegates) are in the process of planning follow up actions, and will keep on pressuring our respective national youth councils," assures Ganesh.

"In fact, we already have a group set up on Facebook, which will be used to update each other on what we're working on."