Students tackle world's woes at Microsoft Imagine Cup

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Hundreds of thousands of college students from around the world vied in a Microsoft challenge to find ways that technology can help achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals. Finalists in the software giant's annual Imagine Cup faced off in Egypt, where winners were lauded on Wednesday and urged to pursue creations with lofty aims, such as eliminating poverty and saving nature.

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"They really are taking on all these problems," Microsoft senior director of academic initiatives Joe Wilson told AFP in an interview prior to the finals.

"This audience wants social change in a way generations before didn't, and innovations in technology are coming from these people who live with it, not from the guys in the corporations."

More than 300,000 students from some 110 countries competed in the greatest turnout seen at the Imagine Cup since it was launched in 2002.

Teams containing a total of 444 college students faced off in Cairo for top spots in nine categories, including software design, robotics and game development.

"It's befitting that we do this here in Cairo," said Walid Abu-Hadba, corporate vice president for Microsoft's Developer and Platform Evangelism Group. "Egypt is the cradle of civilization."

Team SYTECH from Romania ruled supreme in a prestigious software design category with an UpCity program that lets citizens be involved with government agencies. The software is to be used in the team's home city of Iasi.

"The project will be developed for the city hall of our city at the end of this month," Adrian Buzgar of SYTECH said in a Microsoft release.

"Then we're going to try to build a company."

Team Wafree from South Korea won top honors in an "embedded" category for creating an easy-to-use machine for raising insects that can be used as food sources in parts of the world where fertile land and water are scarce.

Each winning team gets 25,000 dollars to divide between members as they see fit, according to Microsoft.

Imagine Cup victors are routinely targeted for job offers, or grants or venture capital funding to continue working on projects or turn ideas into business enterprises, Wilson said.

"They go home and they are rock stars in their own countries," he added. "Corporations around the world line up to hire these people. These are the best of the best... I will trust these brains any day."

Participation in the Imagine Cup has climbed annually, and the varied altruistic aims of the UN Millennium Goals seemed to imbue this year's event with special enthusiasm, according to Wilson.

The United Nations set a 2015 deadline to meet stated goals in universal education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, global partnership, battling HIV/AIDS, improving child and maternal health, and ending poverty and hunger.

"This connection between the Imagine Cup and social cause, there is real meat on the bone with that," Wilson said. "When we pointed it at problems and let students direct us, that is when participation took off."

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