

Potential to change the world

BETWEEN August 5 and 11, deep in a hillside convention centre beneath the Sheraton Grande Walkerhill and the W Seoul Walkerhill hotels in Gwangjang-Dong in Seoul, 344 of the world's most promising technology students from 59 countries were giving a host of international judges and over a hundred journalists a taste of their creative genius.

The finals of the fifth annual Imagine Cup (www.imaginecup.com) – one of Microsoft Corporation's premier initiatives to demonstrate its passion for potential (www.microsoft.com/unlimitedpotential) – were under way, and creativity and exceptional talent were free flowing.

Organised in collaboration with Korea's Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, the 'Hi Seoul – Soul of Asia' campaign, UNESCO and BT, this year's event was the largest ever. In 2003, a thousand students from 25 countries participated in the first Imagine Cup in the one Software Design category.

This year, 100,000 students participated in the worldwide competition to find solutions to real-world issues on the theme 'Imagine a world where technology enables a better education for all'. Given the location, it was a fitting theme; South Korea boasts one of the highest literacy rates in the world – close to 100 per cent – and the country was awarded the UNESCO prize for ICT application to Education in 2006.

One hundred and twelve teams made it to the Imagine Cup finals, competing in nine categories: Software Design, Algorithm, Short Film, IT Challenge, Project Hoshimi Programming Battle, Interface Design, Embedded Development, Web Development, and Photography. Cash prizes amounting to over \$170,000 were up for grabs.

A week-long programme was organised for the 800-odd people attending the Imagine Cup, including competitors, mentors, 58 judges (key Microsoft executives, IT company CEOs and officials, university professors, programmers, designers and architects), VIPs and journalists.

After two days of intense competition and the announcement of the results of the first round in

Likened to the Olympics, but for (cool) geeks, Microsoft's Imagine Cup is the world's premiere student technology competition. JOANNA RIPARD accompanied Malta's team, Kablujen Digerati, to Seoul, South Korea, where 344 young minds were offering solutions to global educational issues.



some categories, participants were treated to a day tour of Seoul (including dinner with the mayor of Seoul, Oh Se-hoon, at the Sejong Art Hall) before returning to base to prepare for the next phase of competition.

The winners in all categories were named during a gala event attended by a host of dignitaries, including Dr Abdul Waheed Khan, assistant director general for communication and information at UNESCO, who repeatedly expressed his awe at the competitors' ideas and solutions. Indeed, the majority of the projects scored high in the innovation stakes, while others brought new edge to existing concepts.

Participants in the Software Design category – the backbone of the Imagine Cup in which 55 finalist four-member teams took part – were to come up with solutions using Microsoft tools and technology, making innovative use of the Microsoft .NET Framework and Microsoft Windows platform to build applications.

Abigail Cauchi, Karl Fenech, Jennifer Fenech and Luana Micallef, the Kablujen Digerati team – competed in the Software Design category and flew the flag for Malta.

class and home use. China's Team SEED placed third with CasBam, an intelligent sensory training system for children with Dysfunction of Sensory Integration.

The Web Development invitational challenged students to use the Web to create innovative education sites using ASP.NET and related technologies. Team APB of France placed first with Srooba, a solution for learning foreign languages. Ireland's Team Red Dawn came second with An Online Collaborative Development Environment (OCDE) that teaches students how to write computer programs. China's Team Frontfree Studio-Web placed third with Minovation, a site where students can search for information in seven subjects. The information can then be recorded as articles, images and videos.

The Project Hoshimi Programming Battle (www.project-hoshimi.com) saw programmers faced with real challenges, competing with people around the world online in a race to create the fastest programme to save the day in a fantasy battle of life and death as comic-style graphics brought to life Professor Hoshimi's world. Argentina's Team OIA, France's Team Arenium and Serbia's Team vladan.simov were the top three.

In the IT Challenge, participants were to demonstrate proficiency in networks, databases and servers as well as analysis and decision-making in IT environments. Students were challenged to develop, deploy and maintain efficient, functional and security-enhanced IT systems. China's Zhifeng Cheng, Romain Larnet of France, and Ilie Cosmin Viorel of Romania placed first, second and third, respectively.

The 'unsung heroes' of the Imagine Cup were the six participants in the Algorithm category. Locked away in a room on the fourth floor of the Sheraton, they attempted feats like decoding the human genome and routing millions of packets across networks, through a series of brainteasers, coding challenges and puzzles to discover and implement the right algorithms. Przemyslaw Debiak of Poland, Roman Koshlyak of Ukraine and Szilvester Szeben of Hungary clinched the top three prizes.

Students were to be especially visually creative in the three Digital Arts categories. They were challenged to communicate a story about education in photo essay format. The top three were Poland's Team Maraja, Croatia's Team Black and White and Canada's Team Awesome.

In the Short Film category, participants were to share a perspective on the Imagine Cup theme expressed through digital film. They were to create a meaningful film from storyboard, concept through to shooting and editing. Team Skylined from Poland, Taiwan's Team Circle and Brazil's Team Papa were named top three.

Students taking on the Interface Design challenge were to create functional, compelling and forward-thinking user interfaces by envisioning an application, connecting it to the education theme, and bringing it to life. OOT Graphics Team of Austria came first with INTOI (Interchange of Ideas), a hardware-software set-up that serves as a digital hybrid between a flipchart and a whiteboard.

Frontfree Studio UI of China placed second with Frain, a 3D application of a large-scale knowledge base, providing for clear, easy information sharing. Team Atomium of France placed third with EasyTour, a mobile application designed for use on a tablet PC to help learn about a location while visiting it.



TEAM 3KC RETURNS from Thailand – Prachaya Phaisanwiphatpong, Vasan Chienmaneeaweasin, Jatupon Sukkasem, and Pathompol Saeng-Uraiporn – received the first place award in the Software Design category for their project, LiveBook! (Photo: Microsoft)



KOREA'S Team En#605 – Lim Chan-kyu, Min Kyoung-hoon, Lim Byoung-su, and Jeong Ji-hyeon – received the second place award in Software Design for Project Finger Code (Photo: Microsoft)

Software Design teams were also vying for one of six places in the Imagine Cup Innovation Accelerator programme, a joint Microsoft-BT project designed to help students make their ideas commercially viable. Team inGest of Ireland (Project Signal-Sign Language Learning Environment, Mexico's Team Wisdom Spice (Project Wisdom Spice), and Poland's Team InPUT (Project Onespace) will join the three winning teams for an intensive two-week stint in London next January to receive technical support and business coaching to take their projects to the next level under the guidance of some of Microsoft and BT's best brains.

BT's Kevin Nikels told the international media that \$1 million would be invested in the six teams to help them source funding, identify corporate sponsors and even jobs "if that's what they want". The students will retain intellectual property rights over their projects.

In the Embedded Development category, participants were challenged to build a complete hardware and software solution using Windows CE and the provided hardware. Teams of three or four and a faculty mentor built a working prototype that can help solve some of the world's toughest problems.

Brazil's TriventDreams placed first with Edu Box, a device that can be connected to TV sets to allow learners of all ages to experience content created by their own educator. Romania's Team Aether came second with Networked Braille Learning Environment, specially designed, refreshable Braille displays for



TEAM ICAD from Jamaica – Imran Allie, Conroy Smith, Ayson Baxter and Damien Mitchell – placed third in Software Design with Project CADI (Photo: Microsoft)