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News Release: 08 June 2026

Finalists announced for National Innovation Challenge 2026

After fierce debate and much anticipation, the finalists have been announced for the National Innovation Challenge 2026.

Led by Harrow, Richmond and Uxbridge Colleges (HRUC) in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Industrial Liaison Program, the Challenge received submissions from students across the UK on the theme of Sustainability and AI.

The winners, who will earn a trip to MIT in the United States, will be announced at an awards evening in central London in late June.

Yaseen Akhtar, Managing Director - West London Institute of Technology Business Skills, Growth and Partnerships, said: "I have been truly impressed by the creativity and exceptional quality of submissions. The finalists have demonstrated how innovative thinking and the effective use of AI can help tackle some of the most pressing sustainability challenges facing our society."

Here are the shortlisted entries:

Schools category

The Waid Academy, Fife - Scotland

Arran and Anneliese hope to clean up our air and make a significant positive difference to climate change with their Synthetic Tree project. Their innovation works like an artificial tree to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and break it down into carbon biproduct, which will then be sold in the form of graphite or diamonds.

Arran and Anneliese said: “Being in this amazing competition has been incredible and now that we have made it through to the final, it's just so incredible to think we're in with a shot of getting this phenomenal opportunity.”

St Bede’s Catholic High School, Ormskirk, Lancashire - England

Timothy, Ollie and Wojtek created the DuoPod to improve the quality of life for people with diabetes. The DuoPod automatically regulates blood sugar by predicting future highs or lows, helping to keep levels stable without the need for manual monitoring. Made using sustainable and reusable materials, it will help to reduce the number of diabetes pumps ending up in landfill.

Wojtek said: "As a person living with diabetes, this has inspired my friends and I to try and change the life of mine and others. Now that also means I am in with a chance to go to MIT and look to develop my product which I am so excited about."

St Modan’s High School, Stirling - Scotland

Oleksandr’s Improve Energy Efficiency project uses AI-driven systems to prevent unnecessary energy use in school and college buildings. By tapping into local weather forecasts and predicting when energy will be needed, it can optimise lighting, heating and cooling systems, thereby helping schools and colleges to save money on energy bills.

Oleksandr said: "I am very happy to have reached the final, and I am proud of myself. Reaching the final with the opportunity to go to the USA will give me great opportunities in the future and valuable experience."

The Sydney Russell School, Essex - England

Created by Ayi, Autumn and Junaina, the Cleara app aims to reduce littering by rewarding users for collecting rubbish in their local area. Using prompts and incentives, Cleara turns the clean-up process into a fun and engaging community activity.

Junaina said: “The whole process has been such a positive experience but advancing to the finals has made this extraordinary journey feel surreal. I am truly honoured to be a part of this unique programme.”

Colleges category

Bridgend College, Bridgend - Wales

The Hydro-Vein, created by Dylan, is an innovative renewable energy solution to the problem of high energy costs. The small, easy-to-install module sits on the riverbed like a stepping stone and generates cheap 24/7 hydroelectric power that is more reliable than wind or solar power and doesn’t cause harm to the natural environment.

Ruth Rowland, Enterprise Champion at Bridgend College, said: “Everyone at Bridgend College is delighted that Dylan has been selected as a finalist for the NIC. We are incredibly proud of all the hard work he has put in to develop his fantastic idea, and wish him a wonderful evening at the awards ceremony. Pob lwc, Dylan!”

Our Lady & St Patrick’s College, Knock, Belfast – Northern Ireland

Lavanya created VaccineLoop to reduce the number of vaccines which are thrown away due to expiry. A live digital dashboard allows clinics, pharmacies and vaccination centres to monitor vaccine stock levels, expiry dates, and storage status in real time. Vaccines nearing their expiry can be shared between healthcare providers, helping to prevent wastage.

Ms Briege Moley, Gifted and Talented Coordinator, said: “Our Lady and Saint Patrick’s College, Knock, is very proud of our student Lavanya in reaching the final stage of this prestigious competition, the only student from Northern Ireland to do so. She is an outstanding student and we wish her every success in the final.”

Uxbridge College, London - England

Shlok, Xainaldo and Faithon came up with the idea for Road-IQ to create renewable energy while also making our roads safer. The smart road hump recycles the mechanical force created by vehicles into useable electricity. Road-IQ also captures traffic data, using AI, so officials can study traffic patterns and make informed decisions about transport planning.

Shlok said: "Being selected as a finalist with Road-IQ has been an amazing achievement for our team. This experience has inspired us to continue developing the project and turn our ideas into real-world solutions."

Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Edern, Cardiff - Wales

Designed by Carys, SmartSort is a small worktop device which makes recycling quick and easy. SmartSort uses QR code scanning technology to identify packaging materials and provides real-time recycling instructions via an LCD display. The system reduces confusion and ensures recyclable materials are placed in the correct bins, helping to reduce the amount of recycling that ends up in landfill due to contamination.

Carys said: “I’m extremely proud to have been selected as an NIC finalist. Applying for this competition has truly helped me develop my skills as a future engineer and has inspired me as I take the next steps in my career.”

Note to editors: Following a merger in 2023, HRUC (Harrow, Richmond and Uxbridge Colleges) has rapidly evolved into a thriving educational hub with three colleges and a strong apprenticeship provision.
The diverse and aspiring college group now serves nearly 15,000 learners across west and south London, offering a range of courses, including A-Levels vocational programmes, T-Levels, and apprenticeships. The College group also proudly supports over 850 learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), providing tailored programmes and internships to help them thrive.