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National Innovation Challenge winner reflects on incredible journey to success



A former Uxbridge College apprentice has spoken of how winning the National Innovation Challenge (NIC) gave her an “extreme boost and validation”.

Valentina Vicario won the NIC in 2025 for her Cranial Cooler project, a technologically advanced cooling cap which aims to help people with headaches, migraines, fibromyalgia, and other health conditions.

She studied Electrical/Electronic Engineering at Uxbridge College as part of her apprenticeship, attending college one day a week while also working full time. Her submission to the NIC started as her third-year final project.

She explained: “The foundations of engineering on the course were really interesting and awe-inspiring and opened up the whole capacity of engineering. I had been inventing things at home, but I couldn’t realise my projects because I didn’t have the capability. The course at Uxbridge was everything I had been wanting for a long time.

“My tutors inspired me to want to take part in the NIC. They kept telling me I could get quite far with my project.”

Valentina, together with the other NIC winners, enjoyed a trip to the US as part of her prize. This included visits to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Harvard University, and New York, as well as an event hosted by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Reflecting on the trip, Valentina said: “It was full-on every day, but it was really inspiring to be there in person, to see what different MIT faculty members and departments are doing and how they interconnect.”

Valentina is currently working at Russell Finex Ltd in Feltham as an Electrical Design Engineer in the Electrical Engineering Department.

Alongside this, she is continuing to work on her Cranial Cooler project. She currently has pre-patenting and is hoping to apply for funding, in collaboration with Uxbridge College and its technicians, with the aim of commercialising the project.

Asked what advice she would give to someone considering entering the NIC, Valentina said: “Go all in and give it your best shot, because you’ve got everything to gain and nothing to lose. Even if you don’t get through to the final, you’ll still be able to get some feedback on your idea.

“I had a five-year plan, which was to get in the room with people who would understand my ideas. I achieved my plan within four years thanks to the Challenge. I met so many people who were involved in business, education, and all sorts of fields. They deemed my idea of enough value to win the award; that’s an extreme boost and validation that I’m on the right track.

“It’s been a journey, it’s been fun, and I’m really excited to still be working with HRUC.”

The theme for NIC 2027 is Tomorrow’s World. Students from secondary schools, colleges and sixth forms across the UK are challenged to develop bold, innovative ideas that could shape the way we live, work and interact in the future.

To register your interest or find out more, visit: [NIC 2027: Tomorrow's World | HRUC](#)

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, higher education courses and apprenticeships. The College group also proudly supports over 1,000 learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), providing tailored programmes and internships to help them thrive.