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## Bridging the gender gap in STEM

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A NOVEL idea to transform science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education has won Team VirtuLearn the top prize in the Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) Sustainathon Malaysia 2024.

Students Claudine Ivancka Netto, Chow Xin Ying and Fatima Safiya Fauzy from Brickfields Asia College took home the grand prize for their proposal aimed at making STEM education more immersive and engaging through interactive e-textbooks.

Describing their win as a “wonderful confidence booster”, VirtuLearn team lead Chow said learning from the competition mentors opened their eyes to how they could create more effective results with their idea. “We’re delighted to win the competition and excited to contribute towards closing the STEM gender gap in the future, in our own small way.

“Women have so much potential to contribute to STEM fields, so we should make full efforts to tap into their talents to improve society,” she said in a press release dated April 5.

Team SrikandInTech, comprising Aisya Batrisyia Azley, Nur Adilah Zainal Abidin and Mohammed Zaid Ahmed Alshami from **Universiti Tenaga Nasional**, secured second place.

In third was Team Grow Your Own STEM with Muslihah Mohd Norhisam, Siti Nur Syafiqah Muhammad Hanafiah and Siti Nur Syafiqah Abd Latif representing **Universiti Malaysia Kelantan**.

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**The winners:** (From left) Siti Nur Syafiqah, Siti Nur Syafiqah and Muslihah (Team Grow Your Own STEM), Fatima Safiya, Chow and Claudine Ivancka (Team VirtuLearn) and Nur Adilah, Aisya Batrisyia and Mohammed Zaid (Team SrikandInTech).

Team VirtuLearn took home RM10,000 for their effort while Teams SrikandInTech and Grow Your Own STEM were awarded RM7,000 and RM5,000, respectively.

Ten finalists proposed their ideas for making the best use of technology to bridge the gender gap in STEM fields and provide women with equal opportunities for growth in these fields.

Based on the theme “Empowering Women in STEM”, the finalists tackled three challenge statements in their proposals: using technology to enhance the STEM curriculum, promote successful women in STEM as role models and helping women in STEM advance in

their careers.

In its second edition, the competition attracted 76 proposal submissions from a total of 204 students from 30 universities and colleges nationwide.

This year’s theme was aimed at creating awareness among the youth about the gender gap in STEM and encouraging them to find solutions to close the gap by leveraging technology.

In Malaysia, more than half of the local STEM graduates are women (53.2% in 2021) but men outnumber women in employment, according to research by the Khazanah Research Institute.

Only 69% of the women graduates were hired compared to

72% of men. At the leadership level, the challenge is even more acute globally, with women constituting only 19% of board members and 3% of chief executive officers in STEM companies.

The competition finale at the Asia School of Business, Kuala Lumpur, was attended by Deputy National Unity Minister Senator Saraswathy Kandasami on April 3.

“By bringing together diverse talents and fostering an environment where women can thrive in STEM, we are not only empowering individuals, we are also strengthening the very fabric of our nation.

“Such initiatives contribute to

building a more inclusive, progressive and united Malaysia – a vision that the government strives to achieve,” she said in her speech.

TCS Malaysia country head Jeevan Rajoo said the competition encouraged the youth to ideate solutions that address socioeconomic challenges.

“Being future leaders, our youth are well-placed to push the needle on societal progress and achieve the paradigm shift needed to make the STEM fields more gender balanced.

“Research has found that closing the gender gap in the workforce is associated with increased gross domestic product (GDP), labour productivity and socio-economic development, aside from meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, such as equitable education and economic opportunities,” he said.

TCS Sustainathon, a problem-solving competition that empowers students to find creative solutions to real-world challenges using technology, was launched in Singapore in 2020.

Since then, it has gone global, with 12 editions across 10 countries, including Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa and Ireland.

The competition provides the youth with opportunities to collaborate with private companies, non-profit organisations and government agencies to co-create solutions.