

Editor's Note

Special Issue:

**Empowering Educators: Transforming Higher
Education for Sustainable Development**

Introduction

As the editor of this special issue on empowering educators in the context of transforming higher education for sustainable development, I feel privileged to share my thoughts on transforming higher education with my fellow educators in Southeast Asia. Their perseverance in contributing research based articles on sustainable development beyond national borders continues to create more pathways to shape the future of teacher education and tertiary level education. Policies and action plans on transforming higher education for sustainable development are based on informed decisions rather than sources of information that cannot be verified. My personal journey working with teachers, teacher educators, instructors, lecturers, and educational leaders within the ASEAN region such as the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education - Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO INNOTECH) has consistently shown one underpinning theme. Empowered educators are not an option but provide the foundation to transform higher education for sustainable development. Slogans and rhetoric about the noble teaching profession and teacher responsibilities have their place, but we need to move beyond platitudes. Results begin to unfold when educational institutions empower educators to be part of the decision

making process, rather than a top-down approach all the time. When educational institutions invest in capacity-building for continuous professional development, prioritize educator leadership, and provide a supportive environment for progress, sustainability becomes a part of the institutional culture.

Power relations and empowerment are closely intertwined to running organizations and achieving their goals within established frameworks. However, the process of empowerment cannot be left to chance as power play and unequal power relations might operate in a visible or more subtle way. Noble sustainable development goals in the realm of education can move forward to meet the targets in 2030 if educators and stakeholders have a voice to address their concerns. More importantly, they bring a wealth of information into the world of SDGs beyond macro level policies and we might be ignoring them at our own peril. Macro level policies are an imperative, but the will to act lies very much in the regional and local levels.

While ASEAN aligns itself closely with the United Nation's recommendations and global policies on SDGs, educators in ASEAN face a wide array of problems to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These goals are linked and interconnected to education or SDG 4

(quality education). 2030, the year set to achieve the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development creates a sense of urgency and promise, but reminds us of the monumental tasks and challenges ahead. Can educators who serve in the teaching fraternity rise above the daily challenges that have the potential to bog them down?

As someone who has been in the field of education for the past 35 years, working hand in hand with lecturers and teacher educators in various capacities has had a deep impact on me. Experience would humble many of us on the lecturers' challenging or downright daunting job expectations. The lecturer or educator can be overwhelmed with keeping detailed records, completing the syllabus, improving on exam scores, meeting institutional demands, evaluating student overall performance, participating in continuous professional development courses and fulfilling their key performance indicators. There could be a huge gap between classroom/lecture hall realities and the high ideals of Sustainable Development Goals.

Many lecturers and educators are navigating through rough waters, with a heavy workload, managing large classrooms with diverse students and the need for rapid responses to institutional priorities. The current generation of university students are very different from the generations of the past, and their demands could increase exponentially. This is a worldwide phenomenon and ASEAN countries are no exception. In spite of inadequate funding, increasing targets to be met, and the ever-changing demands of different cohorts of students, lecturers continue to give their best. The challenges for teachers or educators do not end there. Driven by the 17 SDGs, educators become the moral guardians to guide students to take a critical stance on sustainable development.

The 17 goals cover different areas but all of them are in some way related to education as it all begins in learning spaces. Digital transformation, climate change, marine life, quality education, gender equality, responsible consumption and production, or partnerships for achieving the goals may provide opportunities for educators to convert complex ideas into simple concrete actions, walk along with the learners, and guide them towards a sustainable future.

This special issue will reach out to a wide readership on in-depth research that links educational empowerment with SDGs. The themes are centred on research that foregrounds these challenges with intellectual inquiry, methodological rigour and practical value. The issues mainly focus on ASEAN countries and the role higher education institutions to create a culture of empowered educators who have a high level of readiness to shift towards a sustainable future.

Editorial Perspective: Why Empowerment Matters Now

Experiences with higher education institutions gave me opportunities to observe broad patterns that pose challenges in our trajectory towards achieving sustainable development goals. Challenges are many, but I would highlight four of them here.

The first challenge begins with the institution itself. If the institution observes a rigid hierarchical order with decisions being made mainly top-down, those who are lower in the power hierarchy could feel that their concerns are not being addressed. For example, the need for guidelines on the ethical use of AI, and in what ways it is considered acceptable usage. Access

to AI and appropriate usage contributes much to quality education (SDG 4). When members of the institution feel that they do not have a voice on SDG initiatives, a sense of belonging to these efforts could be minimal. The situation is further exacerbated if members of the institution or organization work hard for the success of sustainable development, but are not given any recognition for their efforts. In the long run, this does not augur well for the attainment of sustainable development goals.

The second challenge relates to the digital world with terms such as online resources, connectivity, artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure gaining currency. Covid-19 acted as a catalyst to bring in digital technology, digital infrastructure and online education. However, such a massive transformation in providing quality education was not without its problems. The digital divide between developing and developed countries is becoming wider. Within ASEAN itself, there are huge gaps between countries that are recognized for their first world digital infrastructure while others. There is an uneven distribution of access to digital infrastructure but irrespective of the infrastructure, the expected outcomes in student performance is the same.

So teacher training could include a well-defined syllabus on digitalization, online resources and Learning Management Systems, but this does not ensure that such knowledge can be translated into quality education and sustainable development. Educators could be faced with problems such as students being unable to log in as scheduled, platform failure or unstable connectivity.

If sustainable development is to become a reality in higher education, there is an urgent

need to empower educators with the appropriate digital infrastructure, digital tools, appropriate Learning Management Systems and improving the capacity of the digital systems. Educators should be given continuous training and be assured that they have a support system. Educators acquire the self-assurance and competence to teach about digitalization and sustainability when training is embedded in the institutional culture. These enablers boost professional identity, confidence, trust and the motivation to deliver quality education while supporting sustainable development.

One challenge that is often overlooked is the provisions for professional development. Professional development has many dimensions that require careful attention to detail. It's not merely a numbers game where you need to have undergone a certain number of training hours in a specified period. It is equally important to look into the type and quality of training in a holistic way for the educators. Many educators are motivated to acquire knowledge, skills and the technical know-how on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The problem lies in training that is often ad-hoc, does not take into account prior knowledge of the trainee, or conducted at a pace that is beyond the capacity of the educator. There could be a mismatch between the needs of the educator and the training framework for professional development and empowerment. The challenges of professional development is further exacerbated by emerging ethical concerns. Issues related to AI usage, plagiarism, and data integrity raise more questions and answers as more institutions are not able to respond on time. Transforming higher education to be in alignment with sustainable development

will have better possibilities of success with empowerment. Educators need to be empowered with strategically planned learning pathways that are ethical and a strong support system.

These experiences shape my editorial stance on educator empowerment. It cannot be left to chance and needs proper planning and review of the leadership practices. Educator empowerment must be seen from a holistic perspective. In a nutshell, it has to be systemic, intentional, and grounded in evidence. The leadership has to be discerning, design practical policy frameworks, and improvise pedagogical practices that are realistic and achievable. This special issue has a selection of research based papers that covers much ground on these complex issues.

Provenance Statement

This special issue emerged from long-standing collaborations between the ASEAN Teacher Education Network (AsTEN) and regional bodies that emphasize higher education and development such as SEAMEO-RIHED. The original concept was defined and refined during a series of regional dialogue sessions on sustainable development, digitalization, and the future of teacher education.

Peer Review Process Disclosure

All manuscripts in this special issue underwent a rigorous double-blind peer-review process, ensuring scholarly quality, originality, and alignment with the theme of educator empowerment and sustainable development. The submissions are original

and have not been previously published, nor has it been submitted to another journal for consideration. The submissions follow research ethics and includes any necessary conflict of interest, acknowledgment, AI declarations, and funding declarations.

Summary of Contributions

1. Japan's International Exchange Programs' Transformation for Promoting Quality Education and Lifelong Learning

Janita Jaya

This paper provides an insightful analysis of Japan's digitally enhanced international exchange programs and their contribution to SDG4. Using qualitative content analysis to analyze official documents, the study highlights how online classes, MOOCs, and hybrid exchanges can support CPLD among ASEAN teacher educators. The model for international collaboration in teacher education provided by its proposals is highly beneficial.

2. AI Chatbot Misuse in Education: Ethical and Pedagogical Risks

Irene C. Gumiran & Melvin N. Ambida

Using the SCOT framework, this case study of a Philippine university reveals the ethical tensions of AI chatbot integration, including academic dishonesty and diminished critical thinking. The authors propose ASEAN-wide AI policies and culturally grounded AI literacy frameworks, contributing to urgent debates on responsible AI use in education.

3. The Impact of Online Course Anxiety and Student Engagement on Participation Style in Online Language Class

Karina D. Peña

This study explores the under-researched problem of online course anxiety in language learning. The findings show significant relationships between emotional engagement, participation style, and anxiety levels. Recommendations to strengthen digital infrastructures and encourage flexible pedagogies offer practical insights for ASEAN teacher education institutions.

4. To AI or Not to AI: Use of AI in Academic Tasks

Lee Luan Ng & Maslahah binti Haji Ridzuan

Guided by TPB, this qualitative study illustrates how students use AI for academic tasks such as brainstorming, literature identification, and proofreading. Ethical concerns around overreliance and data credibility are highlighted. The paper calls for clear guidelines for educators and students to ensure ethical, effective AI integration within ASEAN universities.

5. Technology Acceptance Among In-Service Teachers in Myanmar

Wint Wah Wah Tun

Drawing on survey data from 590 teachers, this study reports high technology acceptance levels but identifies differences across demographic groups. Findings underscore the importance of aligning professional development, digital infrastructure, and pedagogical reform to support learner-

centered and blended approaches in Myanmar and the broader ASEAN region.

6. Advancing ChatGPT in Higher Education: Beyond Automation in Teaching Practices

Sirin Chakamanont et al.

With data from 170 faculty members at Chulalongkorn University, this paper examines ChatGPT's potential to enhance personalized learning, content creation, and discipline-specific applications. The authors introduce a "Ladder Framework" for AI integration and discuss ethical risks and critical verification competencies essential for sustainable AI adoption.

7. Educating for a Greener Tomorrow: Higher Education's Role in Teacher Preparation for Climate Change Mitigation in ASEAN

Nabeel Dahicho & Sidra Zaman

Grounded in Transformative Learning Theory and UNESCO's ESD framework, this review synthesizes climate change education efforts across ASEAN Higher Education Institutions. The study identifies successful models, systemic challenges, and policy gaps. The authors propose multi-stakeholder strategies to strengthen climate literacy and institutional resilience.

Synthesis of common themes

A common thread that links these papers can be seen in the following themes. The main themes that emerge can be classified under the four categories.

1. The Centrality of Educator Agency

Research on digitalization, AI integration, or climate change education points to a close link between empowered educators and sustainability. Empowered educators with the unwavering support of institutional vision accelerate the process of sustainability.

2. Technological applications need to be ethical and contextualized

Studies on various sustainable development initiatives have shown the possible opportunities and risks in the use of digital technologies. The recommendations point to a need for context-sensitive guidelines that go beyond general guidelines, AI literacy which is here to stay and critical thinking skills. Technical proficiency alone is rather limited

3. Professional Learning as a Driver of Systemic Change

From Japan's CPLD model to Myanmar's technology acceptance findings, professional development appears repeatedly as a decisive factor in sustainable educational reform.

4. Transformative Learning for Sustainable Futures

The papers on climate change education and AI usage both underscore the necessity of transformative pedagogies that build resilience, ethical awareness, and sustainability mindsets.

Future Research Directions

Based on the collective insights of this special issue, future research should explore:

- Comparative studies across the ASEAN nations, including Timor Leste on empowerment in higher education institutions from different perspectives such as cultural influence and educational traditions.
- Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies within ASEAN countries on AI usage, guidelines for usage, threshold of acceptable usage as recommended by educators and education authorities, ethical guidelines and legal implications.
- Studies on institutional frameworks for higher education institutions that infuse sustainable development based on the 17 SDGs as advocated by the United Nations. Institutional frameworks can study ways of integrating sustainable development at various points of teacher education such as educational leadership, curriculum design, ongoing assessments, project work, learning outcomes, and campus culture.
- Studies on the dynamic intersection of mental health, digitalization, online education, and educator preparedness in multilingual and multicultural ASEAN contexts. With its diverse population and ethnic coexistence, studies could focus on the digital ecosystem and how it affects educator's mental

health and readiness for sustainable development.

- Studies on SDGs with quality education serving as a connecting link to other SDGs. A case in point would be research on climate change in the educational context. Research on practical models of climate education could be customized to the needs of other countries based on their worldviews, attitudes, beliefs, shared values, customs and ways of knowing. Studies on acceptability and a sense of ownership based on input from the local communities will make sustainable learning meaningful.

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Guest Editor

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Acknowledgments

My heartfelt appreciation goes to all contributing authors for this special edition of the AsTEN Journal for Teacher Education on *Empowering Educators: Transforming Higher Education for Sustainable Development*. Your contributions bear testimony to your scholarly approach, academic rigor and high ethical standards aligned to the theme of educator empowerment. A sincere word of thanks to all the anonymous peer reviewers who worked tirelessly to provide insightful feedback so that the best possible version of the paper appears in the journal. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the editorial team of the *AsTEN Journal for Teacher Education* for their continuous support throughout this process. This special issue marks harmonious team effort, collaboration and shared regional values for a more sustainable future.