

Introduction

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Higher education is undergoing a profound transition in the dynamic landscape of the 21st century, driven by innovative technology and the transformative potential of Ed-Tech. The theme of last year's eLearning Forum Asia, **"EMPOWER & EMBRACE: Innovating Higher Education with Ed-Tech,"** portrayed this movement, emphasizing technology's crucial role in shaping future-ready educational institutions.

This special issue presents five papers, four of which were selected from submissions to eLearning Forum Asia 2024, with one additional paper directly submitted to the journal and invited for inclusion due to its strong alignment with the special issue's theme. Together, these contributions offer a rich exploration of how educational technology fosters innovation in higher education. They span large-scale professional development, blended learning in STEM, critical digital citizenship, and transformative teacher education in diverse contexts, showcasing both the potential and complexity of EdTech-enabled change.

The issue begins with Karina Yuen, T.H.

Yeung, and Beatrice Chu's case study on graduate teaching assistant (GTA) training that exemplifies empowerment through innovation. This large-scale, mandatory program integrates blended learning, gamification, and artificial intelligence to enhance engagement, collaboration, and teaching confidence. Guided by Self-Determination Theory and adult learning principles, it demonstrates how technology-enhanced design can overcome common challenges in professional development while fostering motivation and community.

Following this, Ratana Rungsirisakun and Songpol Chuenkhum's study on blended learning in a fundamental chemistry course provides empirical evidence of EdTech's impact on student outcomes. Through a combination of asynchronous video lectures, problem-based case studies, and interactive classroom activities, the study shows significant improvements in engagement and academic performance. This paper highlights how blended learning effectively addresses the challenges of scale and diversity in STEM education.

Expanding the focus, the third paper by Anthony Dass M and Pramod Kumar M. P. M. explores critical digital citizenship (CDC) and its relevance in higher education. Moving beyond basic digital literacy, CDC emphasizes critical consciousness, social justice, and equity in digital engagement. The authors advocate for integrating CDC into curricula to prepare students to navigate and challenge systemic inequalities in digital spaces, underscoring the importance of embracing EdTech responsibly and inclusively.

The fourth contribution by Adrian Rodgers and Tryanti Abdulrahman examines online teacher professional development in Indonesia, illustrating how technology-mediated learning influences classroom practice in a developing country context. By analyzing teachers' experiences across rural and urban settings, the study reveals both the transformative potential and challenges of online PD, emphasizing accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and reflective pedagogy, which are critical factors for truly empowering educators through EdTech.

The issue concludes with Kara Chan and Yuyuan Zhuo's paper on integrating course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs) into general education curricula to promote active learning and interdisciplinary knowledge creation. Though not submitted via eLearning Forum Asia, this study enriches the collection by showing how EdTech-supported research projects foster authentic student

engagement, ethical research practice, and blended learning. It highlights the scalability and pedagogical value of course-based research in higher education.

These papers illustrate that successful EdTech innovation requires more than technology adoption. It demands thoughtful pedagogy, ethical reflection, scalable and flexible learning environments, and a commitment to equity. The progression from graduate teaching development and STEM blended learning through critical digital citizenship and teacher professional growth to undergraduate research integration reflects the continuum of lifelong learning, emphasizing how technology can empower and engage stakeholders at every stage. Moreover, the inclusion of critical digital citizenship and diverse contexts underscores that embracing EdTech must involve addressing digital equity, accessibility, and justice. After all, empowerment begins with social consciousness.

In an era marked by global disruptions and rapid digital transformation, the insights offered here provide practical guidance for educators, administrators, and policymakers. This special issue aspires to inspire further research and innovation aligned with the spirit of **EMPOWER & EMBRACE**, advancing a future where educational technology strengthens educational agency, supports inclusive practices, and nurtures meaningful transformation across higher education.