



NREN Leaders Forum at APAN60

Held alongside APAN60 in Hong Kong, the **NREN Leaders Forum** continued its biannual role as a closed, strategic platform for leaders from National Research and Education Networks (NRENs) across the Asia-Pacific. Since its inception at APAN56, the Forum has evolved into a space for deeper reflection, moving beyond infrastructure discussions to address leadership, capacity development, and the strategic use of data and artificial intelligence (AI) in research and education ecosystems.

Asi@Connect GLDP: Data-Driven Leadership and Capacity Development

The Forum commenced with an **Asi@Connect Global Leadership Development Programme (GLDP)** experience-sharing session, which foregrounded the importance of **data-informed leadership and community-centred capacity building**.

Contributions were shared by:

- Dr. Rajan Parajuli, Executive Director, Nepal Research and Education Network (NREN)
- Dr. Mohammad Farooq, Chief Finance Officer, Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN)
- Ms. Wathsala Dayananda, Operations Manager, Lanka Education and Research Network (LEARN)
- Ms. Khadizatul Kubra, Assistant Manager – Finance & Accounts, Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN)





Discussions highlighted that leadership development must extend beyond training delivery to focus on what emerging leaders and managers should prioritise, particularly in environments constrained by infrastructure access and human resource limitations. Emphasis was placed on the strategic value of data repositories, access to computing resources, and shared infrastructure, especially for institutions and countries with limited capital investment capacity. Participants noted that such initiatives help bridge gaps between technical and non-technical roles while fostering a shared organisational understanding of AI's potential and limitations.

Leadership Training Impact and Practical Application

A dedicated segment reviewed the impact of leadership skills development programmes, including one supported by Asi@Connect. The programme involved 22 participants across the region and explicitly aimed to measure outcomes beyond attendance, focusing instead on how leadership tools were applied in real organisational contexts.

Participants shared practical insights from negotiation simulations, CEO role-play exercises, reflective listening, and structured feedback models such as the STAR framework. Speakers highlighted how these tools contributed to improved communication, trust-building, and conflict resolution within teams. At the same time, challenges were acknowledged, particularly in applying leadership practices within organisations facing policy constraints, frequent rule changes, or limited decision-making authority.

The session reinforced the value of **mixing senior and early-career leadership perspectives**, enabling mutual learning and more inclusive leadership development pathways.

Cross-Cultural Exchange and Gender Perspectives

A key aspect of the GLDP discussion was the cross-cultural exchange facilitated through regional engagement. Participants reflected on informal yet meaningful conversations that revealed shared cultural values and professional challenges across countries. While acknowledging the **low representation of women** in leadership and technical forums, female participants noted that their contributions were heard and respected.

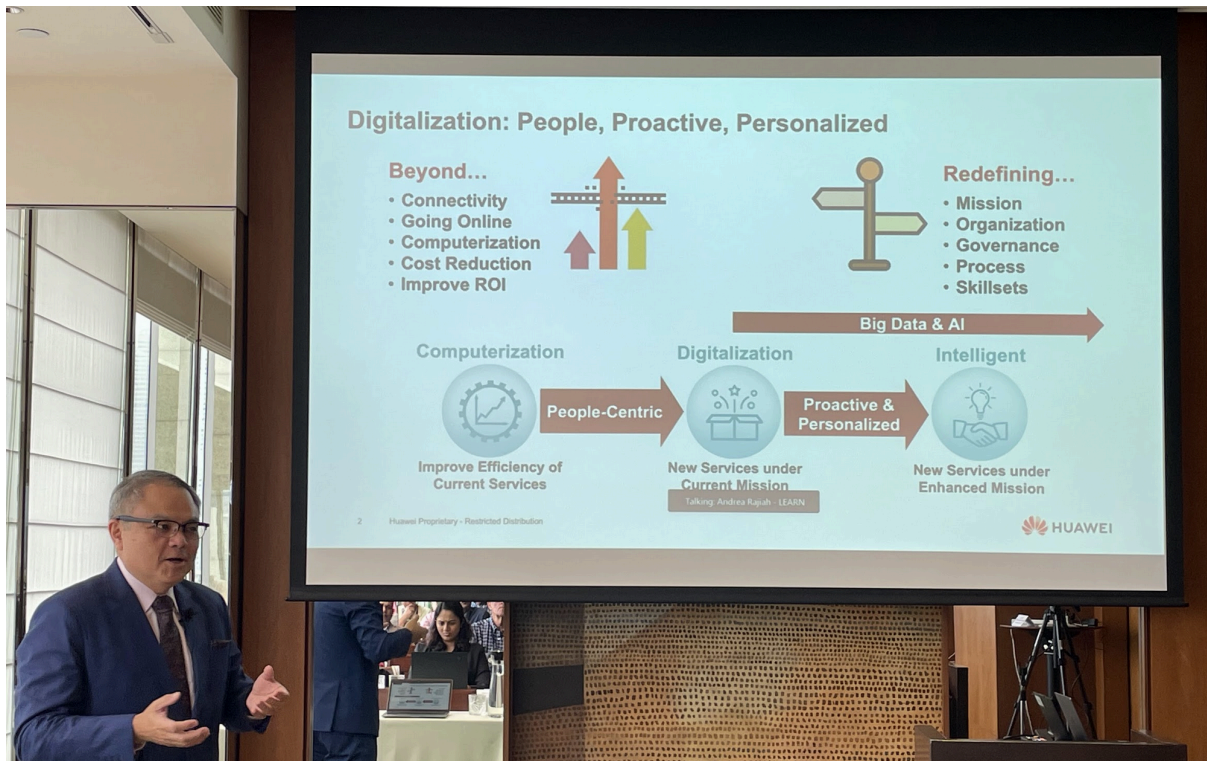
The discussion emphasised the importance of sustained efforts to empower women in technology and leadership roles, including through mentorship, increased visibility, and targeted capacity-building initiatives within the NREN and broader ICT ecosystem.

Keynote: Global Digitalisation Trends and Impacts on Education & Research

Following the GLDP session, the Forum featured a keynote by Hong-Eng Koh, Global Chief Public Services Industry Scientist at Huawei, titled “*Global Digitalisation Trends and Its Impacts on Education & Research.*” The keynote framed digitalisation as a transformation



that goes far beyond connectivity, towards people-centric, proactive, and personalised systems that reshape governance, institutional processes, and skills development.



Drawing on global digital and AI strategies, the presentation underscored how education and research ecosystems are increasingly shaped by the convergence of **cloud computing, AI, data platforms, and high-performance computing (HPC)**. NRENs were positioned as strategic enablers of national digital agendas, supporting inclusive connectivity, advanced research, digital talent development, and trusted data governance.

Leaders' Insight: AI Strategy, Infrastructure, and Responsible Adoption

Building on the keynote, the **Leaders' Insight session on AI's Strategic Impact on Research and Education Networks** explored practical and policy-level considerations for AI adoption within NRENs.

Discussions covered:

- **AI training and infrastructure planning**, including upcoming regional training programmes in Bangkok and Laos with multiple industry partners.
- Challenges related to **GPU availability**, cost of AI services, and the need for **local data delivery** to improve performance and accuracy.
- Experiences shared by regional peers, including parallels between Australian and Asia-Pacific NREN environments in managing AI accuracy and data delivery.

Participants also discussed energy efficiency and sustainability, highlighting the use of AI for anomaly detection in networks, cooling systems, and data centres. Internal projects focused



on improving reliability and reducing operational costs were cited as examples of how AI can deliver tangible value beyond experimentation.



Data Openness, Ethics, and Global Funding Requirements

A recurring theme across discussions was the growing importance of **data openness**. Participants noted that many funding agencies now require open data access as a condition for grants. Examples were shared of regional data hosting models that improve accessibility while managing costs, as well as innovative approaches to building applications on top of APIs to reduce dependence on expensive proprietary services.

The group also explored ethical and sustainability considerations in deploying generative AI, including responsible data sharing, governance, and the challenges of exchanging research data and computing resources across borders.

Looking Ahead

The APAN60 NREN Leaders Forum reinforced the evolving role of NRENs, not only as providers of connectivity but as **strategic platforms for leadership development, data stewardship, AI enablement, and regional collaboration**. By integrating leadership experience sharing, global digitalisation insights, and practical discussions on AI, sustainability, and data governance, the Forum once again demonstrated the value of sustained, biannual engagement among NREN leaders.

As the Asia-Pacific region continues to navigate rapid technological and societal change, the Forum remains a vital space for **collective learning, collaboration, and action**, supporting a more inclusive, resilient, and future-ready research and education networking ecosystem.