



Skills-First: Are We There Yet?

Roundtable Insights

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Key Insights



The Office for Skills-First Practices (OSP), under the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL), has launched a six-part working paper series to spark dialogue, surface fresh perspectives, and co-create practical solutions for building a skills-first ecosystem in Singapore.

The first paper in the series, “Skills-First: Are We There Yet?”, put forth key definitions and highlights five structural barriers that may hinder the adoption of skills-first practices. To deepen the conversation, a roundtable session was convened on **5 June 2025**, bringing together 13 local and international experts and over 100 participants. The session served as a platform to reflect on the paper, share experiences, and identify pathways for collaboration.

The discussion centred on three guiding themes:

- 1 Exploring the structural barriers**
- 2 Prioritising the barriers to address**
- 3 Identifying opportunities for pilot initiatives**

This executive summary distils the key insights from the roundtable discussion.

1. Exploring the Structural Barriers

Beyond the five structural gaps outlined in the working paper—signalling failure, coordination deficit, risk asymmetry, measurement gap, and cultural resistance—the roundtable surfaced several additional barriers that are equally critical to address for a successful shift towards a skills-first ecosystem.

- **Present bias** was highlighted as a major impediment. Individuals often focus on immediate job security, employers on quarterly performance, and policymakers on short-term outcomes tied to political or funding cycles. While some organisations and leaders do take a long-term view and invest in workforce capabilities, this temporal misalignment remains a challenge for many to prioritise sustained investments in skills development and workforce planning.
- **Resource limitations**, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), were seen as a key constraint. Unlike larger firms, SMEs often lack the capacity, tools, or internal systems to implement skills-first practices, such as skills mapping, validation, or customised training pathways.
- **Disconnect between business and HR leaders** was cited as an internal barrier within organisations. Business leaders may lack clarity on evolving skill needs, while HR or L&D teams may not be adequately involved in strategic planning. This misalignment results in missed opportunities to link workforce development with business transformation.
- Finally, a lack of **individual agency and confidence**. This phenomenon is observed among younger job seekers and older workers navigating career transitions. Many individuals struggle to identify their skill gaps, articulate existing capabilities, or plan their career mobility. This limits their ability to achieve their fullest potential in their life-course.

Together, these insights point to the need for deeper structural and cultural shifts—both within societal systems and at the individual level—to make skills-first practices truly inclusive and sustainable. While some of these challenges apply broadly to workforce development, they also do directly affect the ability of organisations and individuals to adopt and sustain skills-first approaches in practice.



2. Prioritising the Barriers to Address

While panellists acknowledged that the structural barriers identified in the working paper are deeply interconnected, there was a shared understanding that some barriers are more fundamental and urgent to address.

Risk asymmetry emerged as the most pressing concern—referring to the misaligned incentives between employers and workers when it comes to investing in skills. Employers are often hesitant to upskill employees for fear they may leave, while workers are uncertain about the return on their investment in training. Without mechanisms to mitigate this asymmetry, other efforts are unlikely to gain traction. Panellists noted an increasing shift in employer mindsets—from viewing upskilling as a cost to seeing it as an investment—which is critical to overcoming risk aversion and enabling longer-term workforce development. This mindset shift is also being accelerated by growing skills shortages, which are prompting employers to explore new ways of tapping into broader talent pools. Panellists also highlighted the need to enhance the applicability of learning to workplace requirements, especially so for learning that takes place outside of work. Examples of employers adopting low-cost mentoring and buddying approaches to support skill application were also shared, highlighting that innovation in work design can help address cost concerns, though SMEs may continue to face challenges.

Signalling failure was also prioritised as a key barrier, particularly the lack of trusted, transparent ways to articulate and verify skills beyond formal qualifications. While qualifications remain a common proxy, panellists noted that they often fall short in capturing the full range of capabilities individuals possess, highlighting the need for more performance-based tools to identify and validate skills. In the absence of commonly deployable tools, employers leverage academic credentials and job history as proxies to pre-requisite knowledge and skills, which limits the effectiveness of skills-first hiring. Reframing the discourse around outcomes, such as productivity gains, workforce adaptability, or broader talent access could help shift mindsets. This outcomes-oriented framing may resonate more strongly with business leaders and workers alike, especially in practical contexts where abstract “skills-first” language may not yet translate.

Demand-led shifts were acknowledged as a critical but often under-addressed aspect of activating skills-first practices, including the limited action from enterprises and individuals. Panellists alluded to the need to tighten the nexus between training efforts and ongoing workplace transformation, ensuring that learning remains relevant to evolving business contexts. In the same vein, upstream triggers for individuals to reflect on personal life-stage transitions and align learning with career aspirations—going beyond conventional career-coaching—were seen as important levers. Panellists recognised that this required an intervention breakthrough.





3. Identifying Opportunities for Pilot Initiatives

Panellists emphasised the need to translate ideas into action through targeted, collaborative pilot initiatives. A number of potential directions were discussed.

One approach is to launch **employer-led demonstration projects** that directly measure the business impact of skills-first hiring and internal mobility—especially among SMEs, which often lack resources but stand to benefit significantly from talent optimisation.

There was also strong interest in piloting **alternative skill signalling mechanisms** that go beyond formal qualifications and job history—such as digital portfolios, capstone projects, and inferred skill models using real-world job experience.

One concept that was revisited during the discussion was the “**place-and-train**” model, where employers recruit based on potential and trainability first, then provide targeted upskilling post-hire. While this is not new, it was acknowledged as a relevant strategy that can reduce employers’ perceived hiring risk while expanding access for under-recognised talent.

One participant also suggested pilots to **support HR teams in helping employees articulate the skills they already possess**—not necessarily through upskilling, but by surfacing, recognising, and reflecting on existing capabilities. Such initiatives could serve as a practical starting point for embedding Skills-First practices in organisations, particularly by empowering individuals to better understand and express their own skillsets. This, in turn, can inform more meaningful development pathways, enable internal mobility, and strengthen alignment between talent potential and business needs.

Panellists supported the idea of **multi-stakeholder pilots**, co-developed with employers, training providers, and public agencies, to test practical solutions and generate evidence on what works. These pilots could serve as a critical testing ground for new ideas, allowing the ecosystem to collectively learn, iterate, and scale successful interventions.

While many promising directions for pilot initiatives were discussed, panellists also underscored the importance of starting small. Rather than aiming for scale from the outset, the focus should be on proving that an approach works in practice. Demonstrating value in a focused setting can build the confidence and momentum needed to inform broader adoption.

Additional Insights

Beyond the three core themes discussed, the roundtable also surfaced several additional insights that are important to capture for a more holistic understanding of the Skills-First transition.

Several panellists reflected that the growing interest in Skills-First approaches is being driven by pragmatic needs, particularly labour market shortages and the urgency to expand access to under-recognised talent pools. This shift is seen less as a purely aspirational policy agenda and more as a necessary response to workforce constraints. By focusing on skills rather than credentials alone, employers are finding new ways to widen their hiring pipelines and adapt to changing workforce dynamics.

In parallel, panellists discussed the need for more agile and responsive education and training systems. Suggestions included embedding interdisciplinary skills into curricula to help individuals hedge against future risks and strengthening recognition mechanisms to guide learners on which skills to “top up” across different life stages. International examples were shared, such as the formal recognition of caregiving experience as a bridge into care-related sectors. To support stronger school-to-work transitions, panellists proposed ensuring workplace learning opportunities for all students and equipping training providers with real-time labour market insights to keep pace with evolving demand.

Online Contributions

The online engagement during the roundtable also surfaced a rich set of reflections that reinforced and expanded on key discussion themes. We would also like to acknowledge the thoughtful insights shared by the participants who joined the discussion virtually.

Several participants emphasised the importance of framing skills not in opposition to qualifications, but as a broader enabler of performance—acquired through formal education, experience, and workplace learning. Others highlighted the challenge of keeping pace with rapidly evolving skill demands, especially with emerging technologies like AI, and the uncertainty this creates for individuals.

There was also strong support for work-based learning and experiential pilots, such as involving employees in sandbox initiatives to codify and validate emerging skills. Finally, several noted the need to nurture agency and curiosity from a young age, suggesting that the education system must do more to foster intrinsic motivation beyond standard assessments. Collectively, these insights affirmed the need for an integrated, system-wide approach to skills-first adoption.

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To view the full working paper, please visit <https://www.ial.edu.sg/about-ial/osp/paper-1>



