Skills-First: Policy and Impact
Roundtable Insights

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Key Insights

The Centre for Skills-First Practices (CSFP), 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 fourth paper in the series, *Skills-First: Policy and Impact*, examines how skills-first principles can be embedded across the policy ecosystem to drive systemic change. Moving beyond individual and organisational adoption, the paper argues that meaningful impact requires coordinated transformation across industrial, labour and skills policy domains. It highlights the need to treat skills as the primary currency of labour markets—anchored in a common language of skills, trusted validation mechanisms, and the recognition of skills as dynamic assets that must be continuously developed and deployed. Drawing on 23 exemplary cases across 15 economies and 4 continents, the paper outlines practical policy levers to close the persistent "transformation gap" between skills investment and skills utilisation. It introduces seven critical government roles, including integrator, systems builder, incentive architect and outcomes evaluator, and presents a readiness-to-adoption framework to guide coordinated implementation.

To deepen the conversation, a virtual roundtable session was convened on 10 February 2026, co-organised by IAL and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The session brought together more than 300 attendees from around the world, comprising a strong and diverse mix of representatives from government agencies, universities, multilateral organisations, trade unions, employers, adult educators and career development professionals.

The roundtable had 2 segments:

1 **First, a sharing of the key ideas from the "Skills-First: Policy and Impact" working paper, published by IAL, on how we can embed skills-first principles across policy ecosystem;**

2 **Second, a panel discussion that examined real-world policy practices, and explored how to strengthen coordination across skills, labour and industrial policies.**

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

1. Embedding Skills-First Principles Across Policy Ecosystem: Key Insights from "Skills-First: Policy and Impact" Working Paper

The roundtable began by recapping the key ideas outlined in Working Paper 4 on how **skills-first principles can be embedded across policy ecosystem to address structural inefficiencies, strengthen coordination across industrial, labour and skills policies, and support inclusive and innovation-driven growth.** These include standardised taxonomies mapping jobs to skills; trusted mechanisms to recognise skills regardless of how they are acquired; and systems that enable skills to be continuously developed, refreshed and redeployed. It also highlights policy fragmentation as a core challenge to the skills-first approach:

- **Industrial policy** often prioritises capital investment and job creation without embedding capability development requirements.

- **Labour policy** tends to focus on employment protection rather than enabling proactive mobility through skills-based hiring and transition pathways.

- **Skills policy** frequently concentrates on expanding access to training without ensuring that those skills are productively applied in workplaces.

To address this, the paper calls for systemic integration across industrial, labour and skills policy.

- **Industrial policy** should incentivise firms to invest in workforce capability development, embed skills within innovation clusters and track skills utilisation rather than just job numbers.

- **Labour policy** should enable mobility through skills-based matching, portable skills accounts and better transition mapping, while addressing underutilisation of workers' capabilities.

- **Skills policy** should move beyond broad supply expansion towards precision upskilling, modular progression pathways, digital credentialing systems and dynamic forecasting that aligns training with emerging demand.

2. Key Discussion Points from the Panel Discussion

The panel discussion brings together perspectives from government, unions and national skills and workforce development agencies across different economies. Three key ideas emerged from the discussion:

1 Skills-First Is Not Skills-Only: Advancing Flexible Recognition While Leveraging the Value of Formal Qualifications

2 Strengthening Skills Policy Through Integrated and Coordinated Policy Design

3 Balancing Skills Supply and Demand to Enable a More Dynamic and Mobile Labour Market

Skills-First Is Not Skills-Only: Advancing Flexible Recognition While Leveraging the Value of Formal Qualifications

Across the discussion, panellists were clear that a skills-first approach does not imply abandoning formal qualifications. Rather, it involves expanding recognition systems so that skills and qualifications work together.

Qualifications remain essential in certain sectors, particularly healthcare and regulated professions, where safety, standards, and professional requirements must be upheld.

The panelists discussed the importance of complementing qualifications with more flexible approaches to recognising skills, where skills may be transferable across adjacent sectors or evolve with changing applications.

Several initiatives were highlighted to illustrate how flexible recognition is evolving:

Micro-credentials and shorter modular learning pathways (UK and EU): Education providers are adapting to demand for shorter, validated courses that enable incremental upskilling alongside or beyond full-length qualifications.

European Individual Learning Accounts and digital credentials: The EU promotes learning accounts and digital credential wallets to give individuals agency over upskilling, especially when transitioning between sectors.

Singapore's Careers & Skills Passport: This links administrative training and employment data to help employers assess validated skills beyond traditional curriculum vitae (CV) signals, reportedly improving shortlisting outcomes.

These efforts aim to reduce information asymmetry by making skills more visible and portable.

While advocating more flexible and modular learning pathways, one panellist highlighted an important implementation tension. Employers often demand speed, agility and rapid adaptation of training provision. However, policymakers and system leaders remain responsible for safeguarding standards and quality.

The discussion acknowledged that overly complex quality requirements may unintentionally slow responsiveness and discourage employer participation.

Strengthening Skills Policy Through Integrated and Coordinated Policy Design

Another central theme across all panellists was that policy fragmentation poses a significant barrier to effective skills policy. For skills policy to be effective, it requires better integration of industrial, labour and skills policies.

While they advocated systematic integration, they also acknowledged that the most difficult and important policymaker role is that of the integrator, requiring long-term policy commitment that transcends political cycles. Embedding reforms within longer-term funding mechanisms and governance frameworks was therefore seen as critical to ensuring continuity, credibility and system-wide impact.

A panellist also urged that skills reform must be embedded in broader labour market architecture. For example:

- Expanding skills supply without improving working conditions (e.g., in eldercare) is unlikely to solve persistent workforce shortages.
- Industrial investments require complementary housing, childcare and mobility measures to facilitate workforce participation and relocation.
- Employment protection, job quality and security shape individuals' willingness and confidence to undertake retraining.

From a trade union perspective, one panellist cautioned that poorly implemented skills-based approaches could unintentionally fragment jobs into narrower task bundles.

Such developments may increase part-time or gig-style arrangements, with implications for job quality and collective bargaining structures.

Panellists emphasised that while ensuring access to fair pay and opportunities for non-standard workers is important, more fundamental attention must be given to strengthening employment security. Stable employment relationships provide the confidence and foundation for individuals to invest in upskilling and reskilling over the course of their careers.

In this context, job quality and labour market institutions are not peripheral considerations. They are enabling conditions that shape whether skills-first practices can deliver inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

An effective labour market that enables mobility and efficient allocation of talent requires policy attention to both the supply and demand sides of skills.

A panellist offered a useful framing of the skills-to-jobs journey as comprising three interconnected segments:

First mile (Navigation): Helping individuals understand emerging skill demands, career pathways and adjacent opportunities.

Middle (Training): The traditional policy focus—institutions, funding mechanisms and course provision to expand skills supply.

Last mile (Utilisation and matching): Ensuring that acquired skills are recognised, jobs are redesigned where necessary, and workers are effectively deployed into roles that utilise their capabilities.

It was observed that policy efforts in many systems have concentrated heavily on the middle section—expanding access to training and strengthening the supply of skills. Gaps remain at both ends of the journey: insufficient navigation at the front end and weak utilisation and matching mechanisms at the back end.

Strengthening the "first mile" requires more than expanding career guidance services.

One panellist underscored the importance of institutionalising skills foresight as a state capability and to deploy real-time labour market intelligence to inform investment and workforce planning and training provision.
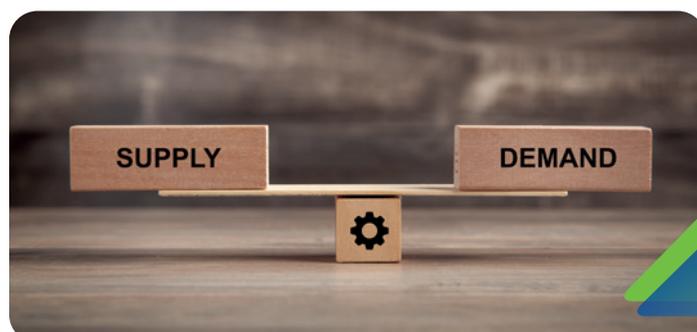
However, governance challenges can arise when skills data and labour market data reside in different parts of government, slowing coordination and weakening feedback loops. In addition, as hiring processes become increasingly digitised, verifying credible skill signals has become more challenging, particularly in contexts where AI-generated resumes are proliferating. Improving the transparency, reliability and portability of validated skills information was therefore seen as essential to reducing information asymmetries and strengthening matching outcomes.

At the same time, the panel cautioned that not all individuals are currently on the skills-to-jobs pathway. Beyond those actively participating in training or employment, there remain groups who are disengaged from both the labour market and the skills system, including young people with weak entry-level qualifications and adults experiencing long-term unemployment. Even where funding mechanisms are available, motivational barriers may persist, especially among individuals with negative prior experiences in formal education settings. Innovative approaches, such as community-based learning spaces, were discussed as potential avenues to broaden participation and re-engage these groups. Ensuring inclusiveness in a skills-first approach therefore requires deliberate strategies to reach those not yet participating in the ecosystem.

On the demand side, the panel highlighted initiatives that embed skills development more directly within enterprise strategy and industrial transformation:

SkillsFuture Enterprise Credit (Singapore): Incentivising firms to align workforce upskilling with business transformation priorities.

Queen Bee industry-led training model (Singapore): Enabling large firms to train beyond their own workforce to support sectoral and supply chains capabilities.

Pact for Skills (EU): Sector-level public-private partnerships co-designing and delivering skill solutions.

In essence, advancing skills-first requires not only expanding training provision, but strengthening navigation, improving utilisation, and strengthening how skills are signalled, validated and recognised in the labour market.

Audience Questions

In addition to the issues explored during the panel discussion, participants raised a number of thoughtful questions that could not be fully addressed due to time constraints. The reflections below seek to respond to these questions.

1. System-Level Transformation

Two questions speak directly to the architecture of skills systems rather than incremental adjustments. The first concerns what it means to treat skills as dynamic assets, and the second raises whether skills-first is even the right framing in contexts where job creation is the more pressing priority.

Taken together, these questions point to a fundamental reorientation in how systems conceptualise human capital.

A dynamic skills system moves away from qualifications as fixed endpoints and towards skills portfolios requiring ongoing renewal—supported by continuously refreshed taxonomies, real-time labour market intelligence, and modular learning pathways.

Australia's workforce planning platforms and Singapore's Jobs-Skills Portal and Careers & Skills Passport illustrate early efforts in this direction.

The jobs-versus-skills tension is, however, a false dichotomy.

Skills-first is not a deferral of job creation but a structural argument that employment growth without capability development concentrates gains in low-productivity segments. The systems framing here is important: industrial strategy, labour market development and skills pipelines need to be co-designed rather than sequenced.

Governance is the enabling condition for both. Fragmentation across portfolios remains the central constraint, and multi-stakeholder alignment requires deliberate institutional design—a mandated integrator function, tripartite platforms with genuine authority, stable multi-year funding, and shared data infrastructure.

2.   Adjustment Within Current Practices

Two questions address the challenge of shifting employer behaviour without dismantling existing institutional arrangements. One asks how skills-first can gain traction in qualification-oriented hiring cultures; the other addresses employer reluctance to measure skills and track utilisation.

The key insight across both is that the goal is not to replace qualification-based systems but to make skills signals sufficiently trusted and economically meaningful alongside them. Qualification-based hiring persists because it performs a genuine signalling function, particularly in regulated professions. Skills-first gains traction not through advocacy alone, but by reducing the information asymmetry that makes qualifications necessary as blunt proxies—through stronger validation infrastructure, interoperable taxonomies and digital credentials.

Similarly, employer reluctance to measure skills reflects a rational calculation: if skills data is perceived as a compliance burden rather than a performance lever, uptake will be limited.

The adjustment needed is not compulsory measurement but repositioning skills utilisation as integral to enterprise strategy—demonstrated through tangible returns in job matching, redeployment during restructuring, and innovation outcomes.

3.   Policy Levers to Mobilise Adoption

Two questions point specifically towards what policy can do to shift system behaviour. One asks how credential inflation and skills underutilisation can be monitored and held accountable. The other asks what institutional arrangements enable multi-stakeholder alignment.

On accountability, the critical shift is from measuring training participation to tracking labour market outcomes—whether skills are actually deployed, whether job task requirements align with credential demands, and whether credential inflation is growing relative to real skills needs.

This requires integrated data systems linking training, employment and productivity outcomes, and tripartite engagement to ensure accountability addresses systemic inefficiencies rather than constraining individual choices.

On governance, the policy lever is institutional design itself.

Multi-stakeholder alignment cannot be sustained through ad hoc taskforces. It requires a clearly mandated integrator function across ministries, legitimised tripartite platforms, funding continuity beyond electoral cycles, and shared data infrastructure.

The goal is not coordination by goodwill but coordination by design.

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To view:

Full working paper:
https://www.ial.edu.sg/resources/publications/skills-first-publications/skills-first-papers/paper-4-skills-first-policyand-impacts

Recording of Roundtable:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNvgEMHXPgg

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