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A Skills-first paradigm: Key features and implications for post-secondary education, vocational training and adult learning

The global labour market increasingly faces critical skills shortages and persistent skill gaps, prompting a fundamental rethink of education and lifelong learning strategies. The "skills-first" approach emerges as a transformative framework prioritising demonstrable skills and proficiencies, supported by, rather than relying on solely traditional qualifications. This presentation outlines the key features of a skills-first paradigm, distinguishing it from qualification-centric and skills-based hybrid models, and explores its implications for post-secondary education, vocational training, and adult learning.

The discussion highlights three significant structural barriers that educational institutions must navigate to successfully implement a skills-first strategy: signalling failures, coordination deficits, and cultural resistance. These barriers reflect the continued reliance on credentials as imperfect proxies for actual skills, the fragmentation among stakeholders in education, employment, and policy, and deeply ingrained societal norms that equate formal qualifications with competence.

Crucially, the skills-first model does not diminish the role of qualifications but reframes their function within a broader skills ecosystem. The presentation identifies strategic opportunities for educational policymakers and institutions to foster enhanced collaboration with industry stakeholders, develop universally recognised skill frameworks, and align curricular outcomes directly to labour market requirements.

Acknowledging existing research limitations concerning SMEs and industry-specific requirements, the presentation briefly discusses tailored educational and training strategies to overcome these specific challenges. Ultimately, this approach positions education and lifelong learning systems as proactive agents capable of directly addressing contemporary labour market demands.