

The Workforce Development Applied Research Fund (WDARF) Grant Call Singapore – 2026

RESEARCH FOCUS

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PREFACE

Lifelong learning has become increasingly critical in today's rapidly evolving workplace. Technology and globalisation are transforming the nature of jobs, accelerating skills obsolescence at an unprecedented pace.

Singapore is navigating an ageing workforce and slowing workforce growth, whilst rising educational aspirations have intensified credential competition. This creates challenges on multiple fronts: employers hesitate to invest in training due to concerns about staff turnover, whilst individuals often only pursue upskilling when facing career changes or when outcomes are immediately visible.

Employers must recognise that investing in training ensures their workforce maintains relevant skills, leading to improved productivity and business outcomes. Similarly, individuals need motivation for continuous upskilling to remain adaptable in an ever-changing job landscape, particularly as organisations undergo job transformation.

Our understanding of learning must also evolve. We need to better understand how adults learn and what adult educators require to deliver effective, engaging training that meets the needs of today's learners.

The dynamic nature of the workforce landscape highlights the need for robust strategies to upskill and reskill workers. To address workforce development challenges, the SkillsFuture national movement was launched in 2015 to provide Singaporeans with opportunities to develop their fullest potential throughout their life, regardless of their starting point. Over the years, SkillsFuture continues to be the driving force for individual and enterprise-led upskilling and reskilling efforts to prepare our workforce for a rapidly evolving economy.

As SkillsFuture embarks on the next phase, it is a key pillar of our social compact under Forward SG, where everyone is a part of the SkillsFuture story. To proliferate research relevant to SkillsFuture, SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) set up the Workforce Development Applied Research Fund (WDARF), a national-level research fund that supports research to create a comprehensive knowledge base for evidence-informed policies and practices on workforce development and lifelong learning.

WDARF's key themes have been reviewed and updated to ensure that they keep pace with developments in Continuing Education and Training (CET), and jobs and skills research. To be considered for funding through the WDARF, researchers' proposed projects must address one of the Challenge Statements. For emerging topics related to workforce development and lifelong learning, they may only be considered on a case-by-case basis.

CHALLENGE STATEMENTS

The Challenge Statements highlight key problems or goals that SSG has recognised as critical in today's context. All submitted proposals MUST directly respond to at least one of these Challenge Statements.

- **Challenge Statement #1: Bridging Tomorrow's Skills Gap through Skills-First Practices**

Policy priorities: How can we create a coherent system where skills serve as a well-recognised, widely-adopted currency of opportunity, enabling more inclusive and responsive training and labour markets in a rapidly changing economy; while supporting both individual career mobility and organisational performance?

- How can we enhance skills recognition and development (including both technical skills and soft skills) to better support diverse segments of the workforce?
- How can we shift societal norms and mindsets towards valuing of skills instead of over emphasis on qualifications?

- **Challenge Statement #2: Strengthening Employer Workforce Development Through Stronger Alignment with Business Growth**

Policy Priorities: Investment in workforce upskilling by SMEs continues to lag larger employers both in terms of training participation and number of local workforce trained (approximately 37% of SMEs sent their workers for SSG-funded training versus more than 90% of large companies in 2024). How can we build a self-sustaining workforce development ecosystem that maximises both training effectiveness and business outcomes, so that more employers (especially SMEs) would invest more in upskilling/reskilling?

- How can we help employers (especially SMEs) define and internalise the value of workforce development for themselves and their employees?
- How can we help employers create a virtuous employment system that aligns workforce development with business priorities, with skills investment driving business growth and profitability, and business returns reinvested into attracting, retaining and deepening talent?

- **Challenge Statement #3: Learning Without Limits - Building Personalised Pathways**

Policy Priorities: How can we cultivate sustainable learning behaviours to support long-term employability?

- How can we effectively nudge career-related learning behaviours through in person and/or digital medium?
- What systematic approaches can effectively nurture self-directed learning behaviours across diverse workforce segments?

- **Challenge Statement #4: Interface Intelligence - Bridging Technology and Adult Learning**

Policy Priorities: The TAE sector may not be engaging with tech-enabled learning sufficiently. How can we optimise human-machine interfaces to effectively up/re-skill workers for transitions across firms and sectors?

- How can adult educators and training providers leverage AI-enabled training solutions or other novel technologies to enhance course effectiveness, personalisation and accessibility for adult learners across different skill levels and diverse learning needs?
- What combination of learning approaches and delivery mechanisms best enables adult learners to develop and apply skills in evolving workplace contexts?

RESEARCH THEMES

The research themes for WDARF focus on addressing the challenges and opportunities faced by adult learners in the current dynamic era that is defined by rapid technological advancements, shifts in labour market demands and the increasing need for lifelong learning. Researchers aiming to cover emerging workforce development and lifelong learning topics currently not covered under the challenge statements may wish to refer to our research themes for our areas of interest.

- **Research Theme A: Optimising Outcomes of Skills Development and Career Facilitation Strategies**

This research theme aims to generate insights and provide recommendations for sustaining Singapore's competitive advantage in the global economy through adult learning and skills development that enables Singaporeans to access good jobs, earn good wages and stay employable. Research should be directed at examining returns and other benefits of training, skills-first practices and career facilitation, and evaluating effectiveness and impact of policies/interventions on enterprises and individuals.

Sub-Themes under Research Theme A:

1. Determining employment and non-employment outcomes from skills development and training strategies, career facilitation and workforce development
2. Policy and programme evaluation of CET, career facilitation, and workforce development interventions

- **Research Theme B: Developing Effective Adult Learning Pedagogies**

This research theme focuses on enhancing the effectiveness and impact of adult learning and skills development approaches, via technology, improved andragogy and innovations in both learning and practice. This theme also looks at developing adult educators which would be important for ensuring quality training and learning outcomes for learners. With increased focus on encouraging adults to undergo training, research should also be developed to understand how different factors affect how adults learn, which would allow for the development of effective learning approaches for adults.

Sub-Themes under Research Theme B:

1. Improving training engagement and outcomes through effective, inclusive and flexible learning design and delivery models
2. Developing adult educators for effective and innovative adult learning curriculum development and facilitation
3. Understanding and leveraging neurological and socio-environmental factors that impact adult learning

• **Research Theme C: Building Future Skills and Advancing Skills-First Practices**

This research theme aims to generate insights on skills needs and gaps and supporting worker transitions. Understanding how technological advancements would impact jobs and skills would allow us to better prepare workers to stay adaptable and relevant. This research theme also focuses on supporting the promotion of skills-first practices by enabling skills to be recognised, and encouraging employers to develop skills and hire based on skills.

Sub-Themes under Research Theme C:

1. Identifying emerging and future skills needs, equipping workers with skills to navigate economic transitions across firms and sectors
2. Enhancing and promoting adoption of skills-first practices, including supporting pathways to equip, recognise and assess competencies

• **Research Theme D: Driving Jobs Transformation**

This research theme looks at how jobs are being restructured in response to industry changes, providing direction for employers on the job roles to prioritise for redesign. This research theme also focuses on uncovering employer-centric factors that influence adoption of jobs transformation, including decision-making processes and motivations, to identify effective intervention models and enablers for proactive job redesign.

Sub-Themes under Research Theme D:

1. Identifying emerging jobs transformation needs to inform prioritisation and differentiation of employers' efforts and encourage productive labour reallocation across firms and sectors
2. Examining barriers and catalysts that influence jobs transformation adoption, including employers' motivations, effective intervention models, while considering best practices and digital enablers to accelerate adoption

- **Research Theme E: Enhancing Career and Learning Choices to Improve Career Health**

This research theme identifies the key factors influencing individuals' CET decisions and those related to career and employment, including the understanding of motivation and behaviours of individuals. Cultural and socio-environmental factors, and the varying needs and differences among diverse workforce segments including aspects of accessibility, adaptability and appropriateness should also be considered. Research should also inform us on how to strengthen career health and resilience through lifelong learning and career development.

Sub-Themes under Research Theme E:

1. Enabling workforce to strengthen career health and resilience through lifelong learning and career planning
2. Developing differentiated learning support and delivery of career facilitation services for diverse workforce segments