Synthesis Paper

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Theme 1. Career Development, Productivity, Skills and Inclusion

Synthesiser

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) Declaration

The preparation of this synthesis paper involved the use of generative artificial intelligence tools to support aspects of drafting, language editing, structure development and the synthesis of information. All substantive analysis, interpretation of survey responses, identification of themes, policy conclusions and final editorial decisions were undertaken by the author. AI tools were used as assistive instruments to improve clarity, readability and consistency. They were not used to generate primary evidence, conduct independent analysis or determine the findings presented in this report. Responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation and conclusions of the document rests entirely with the author. The paper is based on responses submitted by participating countries to the International Symposium 2026 survey, together with relevant policy and research literature reviewed by the author

Executive Summary

Why this paper?

Across the world, governments are increasingly turning to career development as a policy response to skills shortages, labour market transitions, demographic change and the growing need for lifelong learning.

Career development is increasingly recognised as a strategic policy instrument that helps individuals navigate learning, work and life transitions in conditions of rapid economic, technological and demographic change. While traditionally associated with educational and employment choices, participating countries report that career development now contributes to broader goals including workforce adaptability, lifelong learning, social inclusion and economic resilience.

This paper synthesises evidence from 36 survey responses representing 34 participating countries and jurisdictions. Three separate responses were received from New Zealand (Māori, Pasifika and Pākehā) perspectives. It examines how countries understand the relationship between career development, productivity, skills development, lifelong learning and inclusion, while also considering the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI).

Key Finding 1: Career development is increasingly viewed as public infrastructure.

Across participating countries, career development is no longer perceived solely as an educational or employment service. Instead, many countries position it as part of a wider ecosystem linking education, skills development, labour markets, social policy and lifelong learning.

Key Finding 2: The strongest evidence concerns skills and adaptability rather than direct productivity gains.

Countries consistently report that career development contributes to:

- informed learning choices;
- participation in education and training;
- workforce transitions;
- career adaptability;
- labour market participation.

Key Finding 3: Lifelong learning has become a central policy objective.

Countries increasingly emphasise support for adults, mid-career workers, older workers and those undergoing occupational transitions. Career development is becoming a key mechanism through which governments seek to encourage engagement in lifelong learning.

Key Finding 4: Inclusion remains a major policy priority.

Many responses highlight the importance of targeted support for:

- migrants;
- people with disabilities;
- rural populations;
- indigenous communities;
- unemployed adults;
- low-skilled workers;
- young people at risk.

Key Finding 5: AI represents both an opportunity and a challenge.

Countries increasingly recognise the potential of AI to improve access to information and personalised services. At the same time, concerns remain regarding equity, trust, quality assurance and the continuing role of career professionals.

Career development has long been recognised as a public policy instrument supporting educational decision-making, labour-market participation and social inclusion. International organisations including the OECD, ETF, ILO and Cedefop increasingly position career development as a lifelong process that supports employability, career management skills, workforce adaptability, lifelong learning and inclusion. This synthesis examines the extent to which the experiences of participating countries align with these emerging international policy frameworks.

1. Why Career Development Matters Now?

Career development is receiving renewed policy attention across many countries. Governments are confronting a combination of structural challenges, including population ageing, skills shortages, labour market restructuring, technological transformation, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), and the transition towards more sustainable economies. These developments are reshaping both how people work and how they learn throughout their lives.

In this context, career development is increasingly viewed as more than a service supporting educational and occupational choices. It is becoming a strategic policy mechanism that helps individuals navigate learning and work transitions, supports workforce adaptability, promotes participation in lifelong learning, and enables more effective use of human capital.

The 36 responses reviewed for this symposium indicate that the role of career development is expanding. While national systems differ considerably, participating countries share a growing recognition that individuals require support not only when entering the labour market but throughout their working lives. Career development is therefore becoming an increasingly important component of skills systems, labour market policies, lifelong learning strategies and social inclusion agendas.

This shift reflects a broader international trend. As career pathways become less predictable and transitions more frequent, countries are seeking ways to help individuals maintain employability, adapt to changing labour market demands and pursue sustainable careers over longer working lives. The findings presented in this paper suggest that career development is emerging as an important element of public policy responses to these challenges.

The El Salvador response illustrates how career development is becoming embedded within broader national workforce modernisation strategies. Through INCAF, skills development, labour-market analysis, digital transformation and employer engagement are positioned as mutually reinforcing components of economic development

1.1 Career Development and Human Capital

A consistent theme emerging from the country responses is the contribution of career development to human capital development. Although countries use different terminology, many describe career development as supporting the acquisition, maintenance and effective utilisation of knowledge, skills and competences throughout the life course.

Career development influences human capital formation in several ways. It helps individuals understand learning opportunities, connect education and training decisions to future opportunities, navigate transitions between learning and work, and make informed investment decisions regarding their skills development. In this sense, career development does not

create human capital directly. Rather, it helps individuals and organisations make more effective use of available learning opportunities and skills resources.

Across participating countries, the strongest and most consistent evidence concerns these human capital functions. Respondents frequently emphasise contributions to lifelong learning participation, workforce adaptability, skill development and the effective matching of skills to opportunities. By contrast, evidence concerning direct effects on productivity is generally less developed and more difficult to measure.

The findings therefore suggest that career development is best understood as a component of wider human capital systems. Its value lies not only in supporting immediate educational or employment decisions, but also in strengthening individuals' capacity to learn, adapt and contribute throughout increasingly dynamic working lives. Japan provides a notable example of this approach. Rather than organising career development as a single service, Japan embeds career support across human resource development, education, employment and economic policy. The 12th Basic Plan for Human Resources Development positions career formation, labour-market information, reskilling and workforce development as interconnected elements of national human capital strategy. This reflects a broader tendency among ageing economies to view career development as a mechanism for supporting labour-force participation, skills renewal and workforce adaptability

Policy Insight

Across participating countries, career development is rarely portrayed as creating human capital directly. Rather, it helps individuals develop, deploy and renew human capital throughout the life course by connecting learning opportunities, skills development and labour-market participation.

1.2 Career Development as Public Infrastructure

Career development is increasingly being viewed not simply as a service, but as a form of public infrastructure. Like education systems, digital networks or transport systems, it enables individuals to access opportunities, navigate complex environments and connect effectively with other parts of society.

Traditionally, career guidance has often been understood as an intervention provided at specific transition points, such as moving from school to work or changing jobs. However, the country responses reviewed for this symposium suggest a broader understanding is emerging. Across diverse national contexts, career development is increasingly expected to support lifelong learning, workforce participation, labour market adaptation and social inclusion throughout the life course.

From this perspective, the primary value of career development lies not in a single decision or intervention but in its capacity to help individuals continuously interpret opportunities, make informed choices and respond to changing circumstances. Career development acts as a

connecting mechanism between people and the institutions that shape their opportunities, including schools, vocational education and training providers, universities, employers, public employment services, adult learning providers and community organisations.

The responses also suggest that career development contributes to the effectiveness of broader policy investments. Educational opportunities generate greater value when people understand and access them. Training programmes are more effective when individuals can identify relevant learning pathways. Labour markets function more efficiently when people can recognise emerging opportunities and adapt their skills accordingly. In this sense, career development supports the functioning and integration of wider education, skills and employment systems.

Viewing career development as infrastructure also helps explain why many of its benefits are indirect. Rather than producing economic outcomes independently, career development strengthens the processes through which individuals acquire, use and renew their skills. Its contribution therefore extends beyond immediate employment outcomes to include adaptability, resilience, inclusion, informed decision-making and sustained participation in learning and work.

Policy implication: Governments may achieve the greatest returns when career development is treated as a core component of lifelong learning, skills and workforce development systems, rather than as a stand-alone programme serving limited population groups.

Career development is not simply a service delivered to individuals. It is enabling infrastructure that helps societies connect learning, skills, work and opportunity throughout life.

2. What 34 Countries Told Us: Emerging International Lessons on Career Development, Productivity, Skills and Inclusion

This paper draws on responses submitted by 36 responses (34 countires) and jurisdictions to the International Symposium 2026 survey. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining thematic analysis of qualitative responses with review of quantitative survey findings. The objective was not to rank countries, but to identify common themes, emerging policy directions and areas of divergence.

The findings should be understood as informed perceptions of national experts rather than as direct measures of system effectiveness. The survey responses are not fully comparable and vary in scope, institutional perspective and the availability of supporting evidence. Consequently, the analysis focuses on identifying common themes, policy directions and emerging patterns rather than evaluating national performance.

3. A Common Direction Despite Different National Contexts

The 36 responses reveal considerable diversity in economic development, labour market structures, education systems and governance arrangements. Nevertheless, a striking degree of convergence can be observed regarding the role of career development in contemporary societies. Across participating countries, career development is increasingly understood not as a discrete service focused on occupational choice, but as a lifelong policy instrument supporting learning, workforce participation, social inclusion and adaptation to economic change. The responses suggest that governments are progressively positioning career development within broader skills, employment, education and social policy agendas, reflecting the growing complexity of individual career trajectories over the life course.

While institutional arrangements vary, countries report remarkably similar challenges: accelerating technological change, skills shortages, demographic shifts, labour market transitions, declining predictability of career pathways and growing pressure to reskill and upskill adult populations. In this context, career development is increasingly viewed as an enabling infrastructure that helps individuals navigate complexity and make informed decisions about learning and work.

3.1 Finding 1: Career Development is Becoming a Lifelong Policy

One of the clearest findings is the movement away from viewing career guidance primarily as a school-based activity. Many countries describe policies and services that increasingly target adults, workers in transition, unemployed people, migrants, older workers and individuals seeking reskilling opportunities.

For example, **Luxembourg** has developed an integrated lifelong guidance approach linking schools, vocational education and training, higher education, public employment services, validation of prior learning and adult learning opportunities. Career support is explicitly positioned as a lifelong resource rather than a service limited to young people entering employment. Similarly, **Scotland**, **Finland**, **Ireland**, **Japan** and **Singapore** emphasise lifelong access to career services, reflecting a broader international recognition that career decisions occur throughout life rather than at a single point of educational transition. A different model can be observed in Japan, where lifelong career development is distributed across schools, universities, employers, public employment services, vocational training institutions and professional career consultants. While governance is fragmented, the emphasis on continuous career formation across the life course reflects a similarly strong lifelong orientation

Policy implication

Career development systems are increasingly expected to support repeated transitions between learning and work across the life course.

3.2 Finding 2: The Strongest Consensus Concerns Skills and Lifelong Learning

Across all themes examined in the survey, the strongest level of agreement concerns the contribution of career development to skills development and participation in lifelong learning.

Respondents from **Singapore**, **Ireland**, **Poland**, **Scotland**, **Australia** and **Canada** highlight the role of guidance in supporting informed learning choices, labour-market awareness and engagement with upskilling opportunities. In **Luxembourg**, career guidance is closely linked to national lifelong learning and validation systems, helping individuals identify educational pathways and gain recognition for previously acquired competencies. Meanwhile, responses from **Kenya**, **Nigeria** and **Cameroon** place particular emphasis on supporting transitions from education into employment and helping individuals access emerging labour-market opportunities. Despite substantial differences in economic context, countries consistently report that career development contributes to better informed learning decisions and supports the acquisition and use of skills throughout life. However, direct links to national productivity remain difficult to demonstrate and are seldom measured systematically. **El Salvador** emphasises workforce productivity through labour-market intelligence, employer-responsive training and continuous workforce upskilling delivered through the newly established National Institute for Training and Education (INCAF).

Policy implication

The strongest international evidence positions career development as part of national skills ecosystems rather than primarily as an employment intervention.

3.3 Finding 3: Links to Productivity Are Widely Assumed but Less Frequently Measured

Most participating countries believe career development contributes positively to economic performance, although the mechanisms identified are typically indirect. Responses from **England**, **Denmark**, **Norway**, **Switzerland** and **Singapore** frequently associate career development with improved talent utilisation, workforce mobility and labour-market responsiveness. Several countries argue that guidance helps reduce skills mismatches and supports more efficient allocation of human resources. However, relatively few respondents report robust outcome frameworks capable of directly measuring productivity effects. The survey reveals far greater consensus regarding contributions to human capital development, workforce participation and adaptability than regarding direct productivity gains. This finding is broadly consistent with earlier international reviews, which typically identify career development as an enabler of effective educational and labour-market decision-making rather than as a direct productivity intervention. The strongest evidence continues to concern learning participation, skills development and career adaptability. Japan illustrates how career development can be operationalised within national reskilling strategies. Career consultants, the Job Card system and the Career Development and Reskilling Support Programme are

explicitly designed to connect career reflection, labour-market information and skills development. Such arrangements demonstrate how career development can function as a bridge between lifelong learning policy and workforce transformation

The findings should be understood as informed perceptions of national experts rather than as direct measures of system effectiveness. Career development does not create human capital directly. Rather, it helps individuals develop, deploy and renew human capital throughout the life course.

Policy implication

The economic value proposition for career development currently rests more strongly on human capital formation and workforce adaptability than on direct productivity measurement.

3.4 Finding 4: Inclusion Has Become a Central Policy Objective

Support for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups emerges as one of the strongest areas of international consensus.

Countries report extensive efforts to improve access for:

- migrants and refugees;
- persons with disabilities;
- Indigenous populations;
- rural communities;
- unemployed adults;
- young people at risk of exclusion.

In **Luxembourg**, specific measures address migrant populations and multilingual service delivery.

The responses from **Aotearoa New Zealand (Māori)** and **New Zealand (Pasifika)** demonstrate the importance of culturally grounded approaches that recognise diverse understandings of careers, community and wellbeing. Countries such as **Canada**, **Australia**, **Scotland** and **Wales** similarly emphasise inclusion and equity as explicit policy objectives. Importantly, many respondents frame inclusion not only as a social objective but also as an economic one, highlighting the need to mobilise underutilised talent in ageing societies and tight labour markets.

Policy implication

Future career development systems will increasingly be judged by their ability to reach and support populations that have traditionally been underserved.

3.5 Finding 5: Integrated Approaches Are Becoming More Common

A consistent theme across the responses is a move towards greater coordination between education systems, employment services, skills agencies and community organisations. **Luxembourg** provides perhaps the clearest example of a whole-system approach, bringing together education, employment, lifelong learning and validation arrangements within a connected guidance ecosystem. Comparable trends can be observed in **Scotland**, **Singapore**, **Finland**, **Ireland**, **Norway and** and **El Salvador** where career services are increasingly embedded within broader lifelong learning and workforce development strategies. This suggests a gradual shift away from sector-specific provision towards more integrated policy frameworks. El Salvador's reform process centres on the creation of INCAF as a coordinating body responsible for regulating, funding and aligning training provision with labour-market needs through a nationwide network of accredited providers. Japan illustrates a different pattern of integration. Rather than relying on a unified governance structure, career development functions through coordination between education, employment, vocational training, employer-based human resource development and professional career consulting systems. This distributed model demonstrates that integration can emerge through shared policy objectives even where services remain institutionally dispersed

Policy implication

The future challenge is likely to be system governance rather than the creation of additional stand-alone services.

3.6 Finding 6: Artificial Intelligence Is Emerging Rapidly but Unevenly

Artificial intelligence is increasingly recognised across participating countries as both an opportunity and a challenge. Respondents from **Singapore**, **South Korea**, **England**, **Scotland**, **Australia** and **Canada** report growing interest in AI-supported information systems, digital guidance tools and labour-market intelligence platforms.

At the same time, significant concerns emerge regarding:

- digital inequality;
- data governance;
- algorithmic transparency;
- professional ethics;
- quality assurance.

The responses from the **Māori** and **Pasifika** perspectives in **Aotearoa New Zealand** further highlight the need to ensure that technological innovation remains culturally responsive and

socially inclusive. Across almost all responses, there is strong agreement that AI should enhance rather than replace professional career support.

Policy implication

The central policy question is not whether AI will be adopted, but how it can be integrated while preserving trust, equity and human-centred practice.

Figure 1. What 33 Countries Told Us

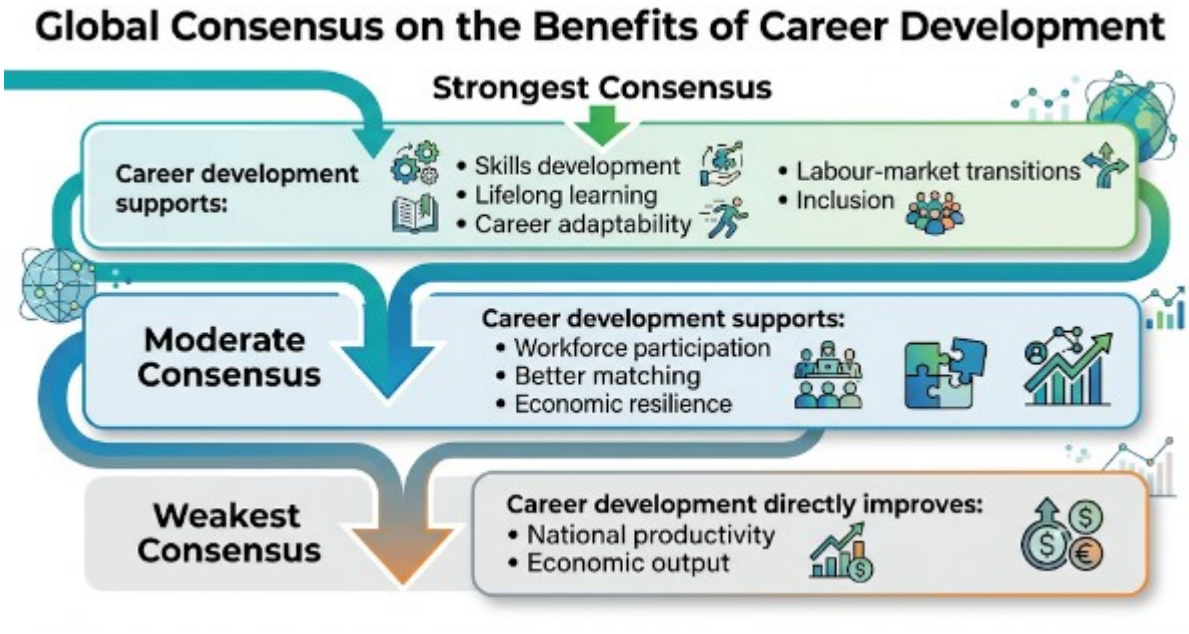


Figure 1 summarises the principal pattern emerging from the 33 country responses. Rather than demonstrating a simple causal relationship between career development and economic productivity, the evidence suggests a layered model of impact.

Countries report the strongest and most consistent effects in areas closest to individual learning and career management, while evidence becomes progressively less direct when moving towards broader economic outcomes. At the base of the figure are the areas where international consensus is strongest. Across diverse economic and institutional contexts, respondents consistently identified career development as supporting skills development, participation in lifelong learning, career adaptability, labour-market transitions and inclusion. These outcomes were reported by countries from different income levels, governance traditions and labour-market structures, suggesting a broadly shared understanding of the core functions of contemporary career development systems.

Countries frequently described career development as helping individuals understand opportunities, make informed learning decisions and navigate transitions across education, training and employment.

The middle layer reflects outcomes for which there is substantial, although less universal, agreement. Many countries reported that career development contributes to workforce

participation, improved matching between people and opportunities, and greater economic resilience. Respondents often argued that informed career decisions can reduce skills mismatches, support occupational mobility and assist workers in adapting to changing labour-market conditions. However, these effects are generally understood as indirect and are influenced by a range of other factors, including education systems, labour-market institutions, economic conditions and employer behaviour.

The upper layer of the figure highlights the area where the greatest uncertainty remains. While most countries believe that career development contributes positively to national productivity and economic performance, comparatively few reported robust evidence frameworks capable of demonstrating direct causal effects. Productivity gains are usually described as the cumulative result of better skills utilisation, higher participation, more effective labour-market matching and improved adaptability rather than as a direct outcome of guidance interventions themselves.

The figure therefore illustrates an important policy message emerging from the survey. The strongest international evidence does not suggest that career development should be viewed primarily as a productivity intervention. Rather, it indicates that career development functions as an enabling infrastructure that strengthens human capital development, supports lifelong learning and facilitates adaptation in changing labour markets. Through these mechanisms, career development may contribute to productivity and economic growth, but its effects are most clearly observed through improvements in learning, transitions and inclusion.

For policymakers, this distinction is significant. Attempts to justify investment in career development solely on the basis of productivity outcomes may overlook its broader contribution to skills development, social inclusion and labour-market resilience. The evidence from participating countries suggests that career development is most appropriately understood as part of a wider lifelong learning and workforce development ecosystem, with productivity benefits emerging indirectly through stronger human capital formation and more effective participation in learning and work.

4. Beyond Productivity: Wellbeing, Agency and Sustainable Careers

Although productivity, skills and labour market outcomes feature prominently in policy discussions, the country responses suggest that the value of career development extends beyond purely economic objectives. Several respondents emphasised that successful careers should not be understood solely in terms of employment status, earnings or productivity. Career development can also support individual agency, confidence, purpose, wellbeing and the capacity to navigate life transitions. These broader outcomes become increasingly important in labour markets characterised by uncertainty, technological change and more frequent transitions between roles, sectors and forms of work.

Particularly in the responses from Aotearoa New Zealand (Māori and Pasifika perspectives), Scotland and Wales, careers are described not simply as individual economic journeys but as processes connected to family, community, identity, culture and social participation. From these perspectives, career success includes the ability to contribute meaningfully to society while maintaining wellbeing and social connectedness. These perspectives also challenge conventional productivity narratives. Rather than treating productivity as the primary measure of success, they emphasise collective wellbeing, cultural continuity, capability, participation and intergenerational flourishing as equally important outcomes of career development.

This broader understanding aligns with the increasing policy interest in sustainable careers. As working lives become longer and less linear, individuals require the capacity not only to obtain employment but also to adapt, learn and maintain their wellbeing through multiple transitions. Career development can support this process by strengthening career management skills, facilitating reflection and helping individuals make informed decisions that remain sustainable over time.

While these outcomes are often less visible than employment or earnings indicators, they may play an important role in supporting long-term participation in learning and work. The country responses suggest that future career development systems should be designed not only to support economic performance but also to promote individual agency, resilience and sustainable career development across the life course.

Policy implication

Effective career development systems should balance economic objectives with broader goals relating to wellbeing, agency, resilience and sustainable participation in society and work.

5. Country Spotlight: Luxembourg

5.1 Building a Lifelong Guidance Ecosystem

Luxembourg provides an example of how career development can be embedded within a wider lifelong learning and workforce development system.

Rather than operating as a stand-alone service, guidance is delivered through a coordinated ecosystem linking schools, vocational education and training, higher education, adult learning, public employment services and validation of prior learning arrangements.

Key institutions include:

- Maison de l’Orientation;
- ADEM (Public Employment Service);
- lifelong-learning.lu;
- the University of Luxembourg Career Centre;

- the national validation of prior learning (VAE) system.

This integrated approach enables individuals to access support at different life stages and across multiple transitions between learning and work. Career development is used not only to support educational and occupational choices but also to facilitate lifelong learning, skills development, workforce participation and social inclusion.

Policy lesson

Luxembourg illustrates how career development can function most effectively when it is embedded within a broader ecosystem connecting education, skills, employment and lifelong learning policies.

6. Four Emerging Models of Career Development Policy

The country responses reveal that career development is increasingly expected to contribute to a wide range of policy objectives. Although national systems differ significantly, four broad policy models emerge from the evidence. These models are not mutually exclusive. Most countries combine elements of all four approaches, albeit with different emphases.

6.1 Model 1: Lifelong Guidance Infrastructure

In this model, career development is viewed as a form of public infrastructure that supports individuals across the life course. The emphasis is on ensuring access to guidance throughout different learning and work transitions rather than at a single point in time.

Key policy objectives include:

- lifelong access to guidance;
- support for transitions;
- informed decision-making;
- adaptability across longer working lives.

Countries increasingly moving in this direction include Luxembourg, Scotland, Ireland and Finland.

6.2 Model 2: Workforce Development System

This model emphasises the contribution of career development to labour market functioning and economic performance. Guidance supports workforce mobility, skills utilisation, occupational transitions and participation in employment.

Key policy objectives include:

- workforce participation;
- skills matching;

- labour mobility;
- economic adaptability.

Examples can be found across a number of OECD countries where labour shortages, demographic ageing and workforce transitions have become central policy concerns. El Salvador provides a notable example of this model through its emphasis on labour-market intelligence, employer-responsive training provision, digital skills development and workforce productivity. Japan exemplifies a workforce-development orientation in which career development is increasingly framed as part of labour-market reform, productivity enhancement and human capital management strategie

Country Snapshot: El Salvador

Skills Development, Productivity and Inclusion Through Training Reform

- INCAF recently replaced INSAFORP as the governing body of the national training system.
- The system combines employer contributions, labour-market intelligence and nationwide training provision.
- Particular emphasis is placed on digital skills, English-language training and workforce upskilling.
- Training is delivered through a decentralised network of accredited providers.
- Resources are explicitly allocated to support vulnerable and disadvantaged populations and rural communities.
- The system demonstrates how career development, skills policy and workforce development can be integrated within broader economic modernisation strategies.

6.3 Model 3: Skills and Lifelong Learning System

In this model, career development is closely linked to education, training and lifelong learning policies. Guidance helps individuals understand learning opportunities, identify future skill requirements and engage in reskilling and upskilling activities. Japan also demonstrates how skills policy and career development can be linked through reskilling initiatives, labour-market information systems and nationally recognised career professionals

Key policy objectives include:

- lifelong learning participation;
- skills development;
- education-to-work transitions;
- adult learning engagement.

This model generated the strongest level of agreement across participating countries.

6.4 Model 4: Community Wellbeing and Inclusion System

This model views career development as a means of promoting social inclusion, equity, wellbeing and community participation. Particular attention is given to individuals and groups that face barriers to education, training and employment opportunities.

Key policy objectives include:

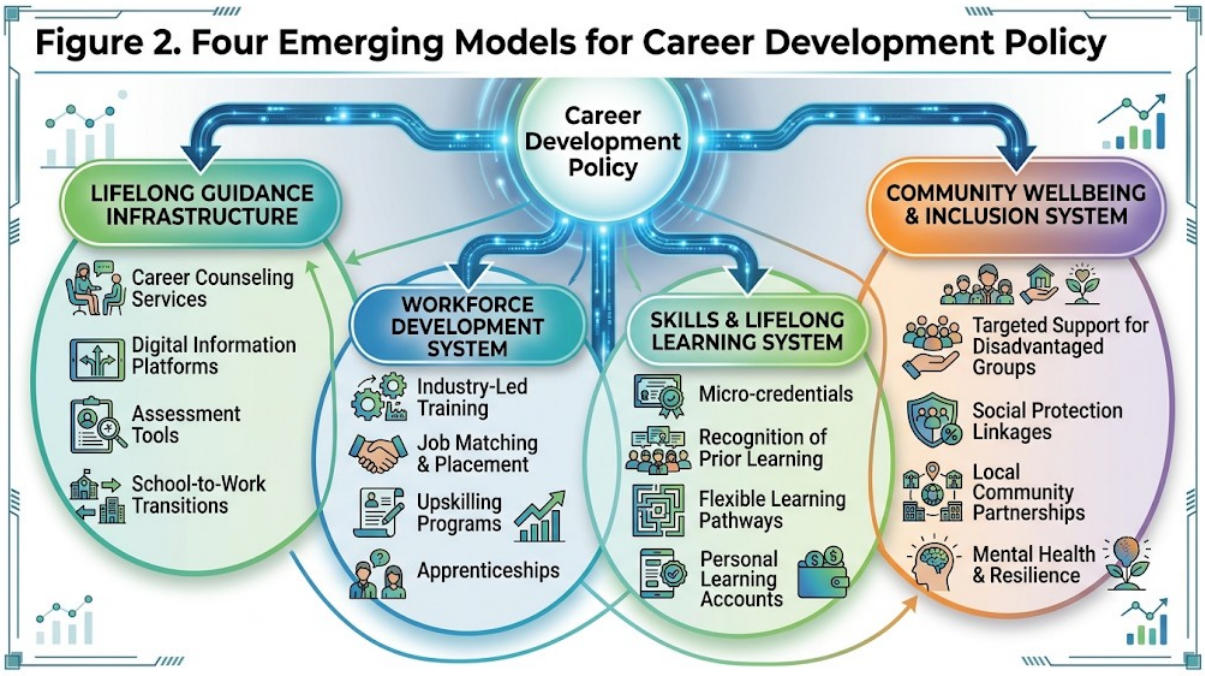
- inclusion;
- social justice;
- wellbeing;
- community participation;
- support for vulnerable populations.

This perspective was particularly evident in responses emphasising Indigenous, cultural and community-centred approaches.

The future of career development policy is unlikely to be defined by a single model. Rather, countries are increasingly combining economic, educational and social objectives within integrated lifelong guidance systems.

Across countries, future policy challenges appear to concern governance and coordination as much as service provision. The effectiveness of career development increasingly depends on how well education, skills, employment and social policy actors work together.

Figure 2. Four Emerging Models for Career Development Policy and Productivity



7. International Policy Relevance

The findings of this synthesis align closely with major international policy agendas concerning skills, lifelong learning, human capital development and labour market adaptability. Across participating countries, career development is increasingly being linked to policy objectives that feature prominently within the work of international organisations, including the OECD, ILO, UNESCO and the World Bank. These objectives include strengthening human capital, improving participation in lifelong learning, supporting workforce adaptability, promoting inclusion and enabling successful transitions in rapidly changing labour markets.

Importantly, the country responses suggest that career development should not be viewed as a separate policy domain. Rather, it functions as an enabling mechanism that helps individuals connect with education systems, training opportunities, employment services and labour markets. In doing so, it contributes to the effectiveness of broader investments in skills, workforce development and social inclusion.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that career development has particular relevance for governments seeking to:

- address skills shortages;
- increase participation in lifelong learning;
- improve workforce adaptability;
- support vulnerable and underrepresented groups;
- respond to technological and demographic change;
- strengthen long-term human capital development.

Policy implication

Career development may be most effectively understood as a cross-cutting policy instrument that supports the implementation of education, skills, employment and inclusion strategies rather than as a stand-alone sector.

8. Final Conclusions and Key Messages for Policymakers

The evidence from 35 responses suggests that career development is undergoing a significant policy transformation. Across diverse economic, social and institutional contexts, countries increasingly view career development not as a narrowly defined guidance service, but as a strategic mechanism that supports lifelong learning, workforce adaptability, social inclusion and human capital development.

A central finding of this synthesis is that the strongest evidence relates to the contribution of career development to learning, skills and transitions. Countries consistently report that

career development helps individuals make informed decisions about education and training, navigate increasingly complex labour markets, and engage in lifelong learning. These functions are becoming more important as technological change, demographic shifts and evolving skill requirements reshape career pathways throughout the life course.

The findings also suggest that career development contributes to economic performance primarily through indirect mechanisms. Rather than generating productivity gains in isolation, career development supports the development, utilisation and renewal of human capital. By helping individuals connect learning with opportunity, adapt to change and make effective use of their skills, career development strengthens the foundations upon which productive and resilient economies depend.

At the same time, the survey highlights the continuing importance of inclusion. Participating countries repeatedly emphasised the need to reach groups that face barriers to education, training and employment opportunities. Career development is increasingly expected to contribute not only to economic objectives, but also to equity, participation and social cohesion. In many countries, these goals are viewed as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities.

The emergence of artificial intelligence further reinforces the importance of career development systems. While AI offers significant opportunities to improve access to information, labour market intelligence and personalised support, countries also highlight risks related to equity, transparency and trust. The findings suggest that future systems will need to combine technological innovation with professional expertise and human-centred practice.

Overall, the evidence points towards a broader understanding of career development as public infrastructure for lifelong learning and workforce participation. Its value lies not simply in supporting individual career decisions, but in helping societies respond to economic, technological and social change.

8.1 Key Messages for Policymakers

1. Position career development as a lifelong policy, not a one-time intervention

Individuals increasingly face multiple transitions between learning and work throughout their lives. Policies and services should therefore support access to career development across the life course rather than focusing primarily on initial education-to-work transitions.

2. Integrate career development within skills and lifelong learning systems

The strongest international evidence concerns the contribution of career development to learning participation, skills development and career adaptability. Guidance should be embedded within broader education, training and workforce development policies.

3. Strengthen the human capital contribution of career development

Career development helps individuals understand opportunities, invest in relevant skills and make effective use of their capabilities. Policymakers should recognise its role as an enabler of human capital development rather than solely as an employment service.

4. Prioritise inclusion alongside economic performance

Career development systems should be designed to support groups that remain underrepresented or disadvantaged in learning and labour markets, including migrants, people with disabilities, indigenous communities, low-skilled adults and those facing complex transitions.

5. Invest in evidence and outcomes measurement

While many countries believe career development contributes to productivity and economic resilience, stronger evidence is needed. Future measurement frameworks should capture both economic and social outcomes, including learning participation, adaptability, wellbeing and inclusion.

6. Ensure AI strengthens, rather than replaces, professional support

The future of career development will increasingly involve collaboration between digital technologies and career professionals. Governments should promote innovation while maintaining quality, trust, equity and human-centred practice.

8.2 Concluding Reflection

The findings of this synthesis suggest that the policy question is no longer whether career development matters. Rather, it is how career development systems can be designed and governed to support lifelong learning, human capital development, inclusion and economic resilience in societies characterised by accelerating change. Countries face different circumstances, but the collective evidence points towards a common conclusion: effective career development is becoming an essential component of modern education, skills and workforce systems.

A New Policy Narrative for Career Development

Taken together, the findings suggest a shift in how career development is understood within public policy. Rather than being viewed primarily as a service that supports occupational choice, career development is increasingly functioning as an enabling system that helps individuals navigate learning, work and life transitions throughout longer and more complex careers.

From this perspective, career development contributes simultaneously to human capital development, lifelong learning, workforce adaptability, inclusion and wellbeing. Its significance lies not in a single outcome measure but in its capacity to connect individuals with opportunities and help societies respond to economic, technological and demographic change.

The experiences of participating countries suggest that the future challenge is no longer whether career development should be part of public policy, but how governments can build coherent lifelong guidance ecosystems capable of supporting opportunity, resilience and flourishing throughout life.

Several country responses suggest that effective career development increasingly depends on the creation of coherent career development ecosystems linking education, training, employment, community and social policy actors.

9. Key Takeaways: What Did 33 Countries Tell Us?

The evidence gathered from 35 answers points to a common direction of travel, despite significant differences in economic, social and institutional contexts. While national priorities and delivery models vary, a number of shared messages emerge from the international experience.

- **Career development is increasingly a lifelong policy.**
  Countries are moving beyond a traditional focus on school-to-work transitions and increasingly supporting individuals across multiple learning and employment transitions throughout the life course.
- **The strongest evidence concerns lifelong learning, skills and career adaptability.**
  Across participating countries, career development is consistently associated with improved learning decisions, participation in education and training, skills development, and the capacity to adapt to changing labour market conditions.
- **Contributions to productivity are generally indirect rather than direct.**
  Most countries view career development as contributing to productivity through stronger human capital development, better skills utilisation, enhanced workforce participation and improved labour market matching, rather than through direct productivity effects alone.
- **Inclusion is becoming a central economic and social objective.**
  Career development is increasingly used to support migrants, people with disabilities, Indigenous communities, disadvantaged young people, unemployed adults and other groups facing barriers to opportunity, helping to strengthen both social equity and economic participation.
- **AI should augment rather than replace professional career support.**
  Countries recognise the potential of artificial intelligence to improve access, efficiency and personalisation. However, there is widespread agreement that technology should complement, not substitute for, professional judgement, human relationships and ethical practice.
- **Integrated lifelong guidance systems are emerging across many countries.**
  Governments are increasingly connecting career development with education,

vocational education and training, higher education, public employment services, adult learning and workforce development policies.

- **Career development is increasingly being viewed as public infrastructure.** Rather than a stand-alone service, career development is increasingly understood as an enabling system that connects people with learning, skills, work and opportunity throughout their lives.

Taken together, the findings suggest that career development is becoming an essential component of modern skills, education and workforce systems. Its greatest value lies not in a single outcome, but in its ability to help individuals navigate change, participate in lifelong learning, develop and utilise their skills, and contribute to more inclusive, adaptable and resilient societies.

While career development may contribute to economic performance, the international evidence suggests that its value should not be judged solely through productivity indicators. Countries consistently reported benefits related to human capital development, lifelong learning, inclusion, adaptability and wellbeing, many of which extend beyond conventional economic measures.

Across diverse national contexts, the evidence points towards a common conclusion: career development is becoming an essential component of modern lifelong learning, skills and workforce systems, enabling individuals and societies to navigate change, build capability and expand opportunity throughout life.

Annex A. Theme 1: Productivity, Skills and Inclusion

Table A1. Main messages from participating countries

Country	Main Theme 1 Message
Australia	Career development supports workforce adaptability and lifelong learning.
Austria	Guidance contributes to skills matching and labour market efficiency.
Bangladesh	Guidance can support youth transitions into employment and training.
Brazil	Inclusion and access remain central policy concerns.
Burundi	Career services support educational and labour market participation.
Cameroon	Guidance helps address youth employment challenges.
Canada	Inclusion, lifelong guidance and workforce transitions are key priorities.
Chile	Career development supports human capital and employability.
Colombia	Guidance contributes to social mobility and participation.
Croatia	Lifelong learning and employment transitions are increasingly important.
Denmark	Career development is linked to workforce adaptability and skills policies.
England	Guidance helps address skills shortages and labour market change.
Finland	Lifelong guidance is embedded within broader education and employment policies.
Greece	Career development supports educational and workforce transitions.
India	Growing emphasis on skills development and workforce participation.
Ireland	Lifelong guidance supports learning, inclusion and economic development.
Japan	Career development supports human capital development, reskilling and workforce adaptability
Kenya	Career development supports transition from education to work.
Luxembourg	Integrated lifelong guidance ecosystem linking education, skills and employment.
New Zealand (Māori)	Careers are connected to identity, wellbeing and community flourishing.
New Zealand (Pasifika)	Career development should reflect community, culture and collective wellbeing.
New Zealand (Pākehā)	Lifelong guidance supports skills, transitions and adaptability.
Nigeria	Guidance supports employability and youth labour market participation.
North Macedonia	Skills and employment transitions remain key priorities.
Norway	Guidance contributes to labour market participation and social inclusion.
Peru	Career development supports educational attainment and employability.
Poland	Lifelong learning and workforce development are central themes.
El Salvador	Career development supports productivity through labour-market intelligence, workforce upskilling, digital transformation and inclusive skills development.
Scotland	Career development is a lifelong public service supporting inclusion and growth.
Singapore	Guidance is strongly connected to lifelong learning and workforce development.
South Korea	Career services support adaptation to rapid economic change.
Sri Lanka	Guidance assists transitions into learning and employment.
Switzerland	Career development contributes to effective skills utilisation.
Tunisia	Guidance supports young people navigating labour market uncertainty.
United States	Career pathways, workforce participation and skills development are priorities.
Wales	Career development contributes to wellbeing, inclusion and economic participation.

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