Policy Briefing

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Skills Foresight in SADC: Unlocking Opportunities in Green, Digital and AI Futures

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Recommendations

- The SADC Secretariat collaborating with member states should develop national higher education and TVET strategies to implement a region-wide skills foresight framework by 2026. This should be aligned with the SADC Futures of Higher Education and TVET Strategic Framework of 2023, ensuring equitable access, relevance and applicability of skills for emerging green and digital economy industries.
- The SADC Secretariat, in collaboration with the UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa, should develop and implement a regional digital and green skills accreditation system by 2026. This should ensure quality assurance, recognition and alignment of non-traditional training programmes with SADC's sustainability and technological goals.
- The SAIIA Futures Programme and the Centre for the Future of Work should establish a regional anticipatory governance framework for skills development by 2026. The aim should

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be to integrate proactive skills foresight and skills anticipation strategies into SADC's policymaking processes, ensuring alignment of skills development with green, digital and AI transitions.

- The SADC Secretariat, in collaboration with the UNDP Accelerator Labs, should implement a comprehensive member state systems-mapping approach that incorporates stakeholder-driven foresight and systemic innovation. This mapping can guide SADC approaches to expanding member state access to education and training and ensuring curricula alignment with regional goals and local needs to foster a resilient, future-ready workforce and wellbeing economies.

Executive summary

The convergence of green industrialisation, digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to transform economies globally, presenting both opportunities and challenges for SADC. This policy briefing is based on participatory futures research, integrating strategic foresight, anticipatory governance and sustainable development perspectives to examine implications of green, digital and AI transitions for skills development in the region. Key challenges are identified within the SADC skills ecosystem, including issues of access, relevance and applicability. Critical imperatives for advancing green, digital and AI skills are outlined. The briefing explores factors shaping industrialisation, futures of education and learning and the rapidly evolving landscape of digital and AI technologies. It also highlights critical uncertainties that may impact skills development pathways in SADC. Actionable recommendations are provided to enhance the region's skills development strategies to ensure these are anticipatory, future-ready, adaptive and resilient in response to ongoing global transitions.

Green industrialisation in the era of digitalisation and AI

The convergence of green industrialisation, digitalisation and AI has the potential to reshape economies and societies globally, presenting both opportunities and challenges for SADC. This policy briefing explores how SADC can strategically align skills development with green and digital transitions to build sustainable, inclusive and adaptive economies and societies.

SADC, comprising 16 member states, has abundant natural resources and is rich in cultural diversity, yet faces persistent issues such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation. Harnessing the potential of green, digital and AI-driven transformations by ensuring skills development is suitably responsive to these transitions can contribute to addressing prevailing challenges and creating more resilient and sustainable futures for SADC.

This policy briefing assesses the current skills landscape in SADC, highlighting the need for green, digital and AI competencies. It explores how green industrialisation, digitalisation and AI are intersecting to shape new worlds of work, industries and economies. The recommendations suggested support skills development pathways that are inclusive, transformative, forward-looking and aligned with sustainable development principles.

The insights presented here stem from key events and stakeholder engagements, including the Futures of Learning Conference (2021), the Learning Technologies Conference (2023) and a consultative workshop on AI and the Future of Work in Africa (2023). Using a participatory futures methodology, the briefing integrates foresight and complexity, anticipatory governance and sustainable development approaches.

The need to address skills gaps

As technological advancements and climate change imperatives accelerate, and as green and digital economies and societies take shape, there is a pressing need to reassess and realign skills, competencies, education and training systems. By aligning education and training systems with the twin imperatives of environmental sustainability and technological advancement, SADC can unlock latent potential for national and regional advancement.

SADC acknowledges that skills development is critical in achieving the SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020–2030 and SADC Vision 2050, which aspire to position the region as a competitive middle- to high-income industrialised bloc. This research underscores that by adopting skills foresight[1] and skills governance[2] practices SADC can better prepare for emerging opportunities and challenges from green industrialisation and digitalisation.

Green industrialisation, as defined by the UN Industrial Development Organization, entails two complementary dimensions. First, existing industries are greened by adopting cleaner technologies, enhancing resource efficiency and embracing circular economy principles. Second, green enterprises that deliver environmentally sustainable goods and services are fostered. These twin pillars aim to decouple industrial growth from ecological degradation while driving the creation of green jobs in sustainable economies and societies.[3]

1 Skills foresight (SF) is the specific branch of strategic foresight related to anticipating skills demand in the face of rapidly increasing uncertainty. It involves systematically integrating anticipatory intelligence from various sources to inform policy planning and preparing for future skills needs. See Francois Pretorius and Deon Cloete, "Training in Uncertainty: Skills Foresight for a Just Green Hydrogen Transition" (Policy Briefing 291, SAIIA, May 2024).

2 Skills governance is the process of putting in place institutional structures, operational processes and dissemination channels that may aid stakeholder interaction and policy reaction by applying skills planning, skills foresight and skills anticipation. See Letitia Jentel and Deon Cloete, "Skills Governance and the TVET Ecosystem: Pioneering Systemic Innovations for the Emerging Green Hydrogen Economy" (Policy Briefing 293, SAIIA, May 2024).

3 Ralph Luken and Edward Clarence-Smith, "Green Industrialisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: A guide for Policy Makers" (Institute of African Leadership for Sustainable Development, February 2019).

Concurrently, digitalisation and AI are reshaping economies and societies, revolutionising industrial processes, business models, education, health and governance systems. Technologies such as robotics, machine learning and smart systems hold immense potential to advance sustainable development. However, the realisation of this potential relies heavily on a skilled workforce and populations capable of beneficially adapting to evolving industries, economies and societies.

Challenges in SADC skills development

While SADC recognises the importance of education and skills development for poverty alleviation, economic growth and improved livelihoods, its education and training systems face significant challenges. Although enrolment rates have improved across the region, they have not translated into higher graduation rates or enhanced educational outcomes. Barriers such as poverty, inadequate infrastructure and entrenched cultural attitudes contribute to high dropout rates, especially at advanced education levels, leading to critical skills gaps.[4]

Efforts to improve educational outcomes and skills development need to address three critical impact factors: access, relevance and applicability.[5] Access encompasses the inclusion of vulnerable populations, including women, people with disabilities and low-income communities. Relevance requires curricula and pedagogy to reflect contemporary and contextual realities, equipping learners with skills necessary to adapt to ongoing shifts. Applicability involves aligning education and training systems with the demands of green and digital transitions, among other transformations, to capacitate learners and prepare graduates for employment and entrepreneurship and so ensure secure and sustainable livelihoods.

Recognising these impact factors, the RISDP 2020–2030 underscores the importance of equitable access to quality education as a cornerstone of sustainable development. It calls for addressing inequities that hinder disadvantaged groups, including the high cost of education and under-resourced institutions. Further, the mismatch between the supply of appropriately skilled talent and the demands of key sectors, which exacerbates productivity and competitiveness challenges, needs to be addressed.

The imperative for digital and green skills

Opportunities abound in the growing demand for digital and green skills across the SADC region. Renewable energy systems, sustainable agriculture and green manufacturing are some of the areas creating new occupations that require specialised green and tech competencies. Identified development priority sectors such as agro-processing, mineral

4 Njeri Mwagiru, "Africa's Youth Are the World's Future Skills Base but There's a Critical Need for Skills Development", *The Mail & Guardian* (blog), May 25, 2023.

5 Finland Futures Research Centre, "Learning Futures – Futures of Learning Conference" (FFRC, University of Turku, 2021).

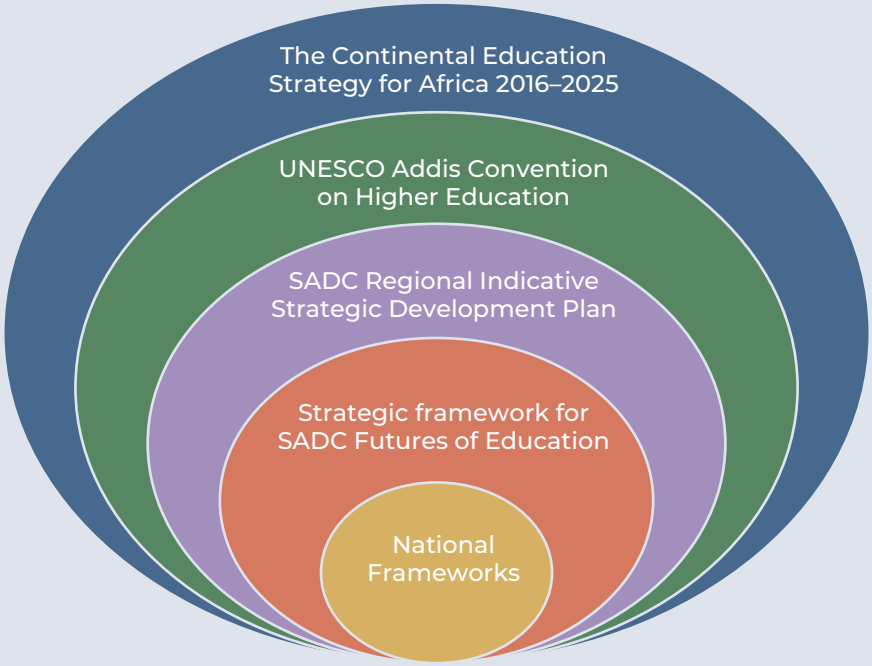
beneficiation and pharmaceuticals also hinge on enhanced capabilities to harness science, digital and AI technologies and green innovations.

In terms of risks, climate change-related hazards, including extreme weather events, underscore the urgency of building social-ecological resilience through skills development. SADC needs to ensure its workforce is equipped with the knowledge and tools needed for climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction and decarbonisation efforts. Similarly, digitalisation and AI present high-impact risks related to data privacy, cybersecurity and digital divides, necessitating a skills development focus that fosters digital rights and promotes human-centred approaches and responses to technological advancements.[6]

SADC skills development pathways should therefore address both opportunities and risks, fostering competencies for green and digital transitions while promoting inclusive, equitable and sustainable wellbeing economies and societies.

Growing skills foresight in SADC

Figure 1 Regional and Global Framework Nest for Strategic Framework on SADC Futures of Higher Education and TVET Strategic Framework



Source: Compiled by SADC, UNESCO and SAIIA

6 Melody Musoni, Litha Mzinyathi and Deon Cloete, "Futures of Digital Rights in SADC: Towards a Common Approach to Digital Protection and Data Justice" (Occasional Paper 358, SAIIA, August 2024).

In aligning skills development pathways with the demands of green, digital and AI transformative shifts, SADC member states can benefit from implementing a skills foresight and skills governance approach, based on the SADC Futures of Higher Education and TVET[7] Strategic Framework. This framework for skills development focuses on identifying high-impact opportunities, anticipating disruptions and leveraging cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary collaboration to foster skills development.

Importantly, the interplay of green and digital skills is not merely about equipping the workforce with technical competencies; it involves fostering a broader ecosystem of innovation, regulation and adaptation that aligns technological advancements with sustainable development objectives. Beyond technical proficiency in green and digital technologies, SADC skills development requires systems thinking, systemic innovation and transformative capabilities.

From this lens, a key issue to address is the absence of robust regulatory frameworks. The lack of legislation to govern green transitions risks undermining global sustainability goals, while inadequate oversight of digital and AI technologies can lead to their misuse, exacerbating inequalities and security threats. For SADC, developing comprehensive skills development pathways will therefore require regulatory coordination and harmonisation across a range of institutions and issue areas, from national to regional and global levels.

Wellbeing, circular and sharing economies

As SADC navigates evolving economic and societal landscapes, it is worthwhile to note the emergence of wellbeing, circular and sharing economies, and the pivotal enabling role of skills development.

A range of global challenges have exposed the limitations of extractive economic models that prioritise short-term gains over long-term sustainability. These models often lead to the depletion of natural resources, exploitative labour practices and significant social and environmental externalities. As a result, alternative economic paradigms focused on wellbeing,[8] regeneration,[9] circularity[10] and peer-to-peer learning or sharing[11] are gaining traction. Responsible consumerism and investment are raising awareness of environmental and social impacts as well as requiring new technical skills to engage, for instance, with digital marketplaces and sustainable production systems.

7 Technical and Vocational Education and Training.

8 Steven Lichty and Deon Cloete, "SADC Futures of Green Industrialisation: A Call for an Alternative Paradigm?" (Policy Insight 145, SAIIA, June 2023).

9 Lichty and Cloete, "SADC Futures".

10 Francois Pretorius et al., "Beyond Linear Economies: Envisioning the Future of Circular Economies in SADC" (Occasional Paper 356, SAIIA, April 2024).

11 Deon Cloete et al., *The South African Green Hydrogen TVET Ecosystem Just Transition Strategic Framework*, UK-PACT Synthesis Report (SAIIA, December 2022).

Wellbeing economies prioritise systemic measures of socio-economic progress that go beyond GDP, incorporating metrics that reflect environmental sustainability, social equity and human development. Circular economies emphasise the regenerative use of resources, minimising waste through principles such as reuse, recycling and sustainable production. Similarly, sharing economies leverage digital platforms to foster peer-to-peer exchange, enhancing resource efficiency and access.

Growing skills foresight in SADC can ensure skills development frameworks are responsive and actively contribute to, as well as benefit from, these emerging economic models, driving inclusive and sustainable growth across the region.

SADC skills futures

Alignment between current and emerging skills demands is critical. Foundational competencies in STEM[12] remain central to supporting digitalisation, green industrialisation and AI advancements. At the same time, complementary skills in strategy, leadership, communication and creativity are increasingly valued for their role in enabling innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Newly emerging competencies such as digital literacy, environmental literacy, systems literacy[13] and futures literacy[14] are particularly relevant to SADC's aspirations. These meta-skills, combined with entrepreneurial, problem-solving and critical-thinking abilities, are vital for fostering innovation, adaptability and resilience in the face of rapid change. For a region with a growing youthful population, entrepreneurial skills hold particular promise in driving job creation and economic diversification.

Despite this recognition, significant barriers hinder the effective integration of needed competencies into education and training systems. Formal curricula development often lags behind, constrained by lengthy approval processes and limited foresight in programme design. Non-traditional training interventions, while more agile, face challenges in quality assurance and alignment with regional needs. Quality assurance frameworks are needed to guide diverse learning providers in delivering relevant, high-quality training that meets regional and global demands.

12 Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

13 Systems literacy combines conceptual knowledge (knowledge of system properties and behaviours) and reasoning skills (the ability to locate situations in wider contexts, see multiple levels of perspective within a system, trace complex interrelationships, look for endogenous or 'within system' influences, be aware of changing behaviour over time, and recognise recurring patterns that exist within a wide variety of systems). See Linda Booth Sweeney, "Food Systems, Climate Systems, Laundry Systems: The Time for Systems Literacy Is Now!", *The Systems Thinker*, November 14, 2015; https://thesystemsthinker.com/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/210205pk.pdf.

14 "Futures Literacy helps people understand why and how we use the future to prepare, plan, and interact with the complexity and novelty of our societies. Through structured on-the-ground learning-by-doing activities known as Futures Literacy Laboratories (FLLs), communities and individuals can learn about how the origins of what they imagine and can empower them to diversify their actions." See UNESCO, "Futures Literacy & Foresight: What Is Futures Literacy (FL)?," accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.unesco.org/en/futures-literacy.

To address these issues, SADC can embed skills foresight and associated methodologies in skills development planning, to support programmes that are fit-for-purpose, innovative and adaptable.[15]

High-impact key uncertainties confronting skills futures in SADC

Several systemic constraints – including gaps in policy, limited innovation and preparedness for rapid change and the absence of anticipatory governance – threaten to undermine opportunities for SADC to better align skills development pathways with the demands of emerging green, digital and AI economies.

Policy innovation

While recognising the importance of skills development for green and digital transitions, current policy frameworks within SADC often lack coherence, depth and actionable strategies. Fragmented approaches create competing development priorities, misaligned institutional policies and uneven progress. To address these gaps, SADC requires innovative strategies that balance immediate economic needs with long-term sustainability.

In particular, the region needs to navigate its reliance on coal and other fossil fuel industries, which, while economically significant, risk becoming stranded assets as green transitions accelerate. Skills development initiatives that address both existing needs in fossil fuel-based sectors and emerging demands for green industrialisation should be adopted.

Green industrialisation presents an opportunity to transform outdated economic thinking and industrial models. By adopting resource-balanced, renewable energy-led industrialisation strategies that minimise environmental degradation, the region can enter a new era of energy democracy and future-fit economics. Simultaneously, embedding digital and AI capabilities in public and private sector operations can enhance efficiency, effectiveness and inclusivity. However, critical barriers remain, including inadequate infrastructure, limited connectivity and the underrepresentation of African data, languages and cultural contexts in digital and AI applications.[16]

Updating curricula to include systems and futures literacy, digital competencies, creativity and environmental stewardship is essential. Graduates must be equipped not only with technical skills but also with the critical thinking, agency and global citizenship necessary to thrive in evolving economies.

15 Pretorius and Cloete, "Training in Uncertainty".

16 Microsoft Research, "AI and the Future of Work in Africa" (White Paper, Microsoft Research, Microsoft Philanthropies, University of Pretoria, NEPAD, Lelapa AI, and Oxford University, June 2024).

Preparedness and the pace of change

The rapid pace of technological and environmental change necessitates proactive skills development. SADC should build capabilities in foundational areas such as digital and green infrastructure, human capital development and regulatory frameworks. Equally important is fostering a culture of continuous learning to ensure resilience amid shifting labour market demands.

Anticipating future skills requirements can mitigate the risk of redundancy while unlocking opportunities for economic wellbeing. This includes redefining or augmenting existing roles, introducing new types of jobs and decommissioning outdated tasks. For instance, as green and digital economies expand, succession planning and talent development will be critical in bridging skills gaps and preparing for emerging challenges.[17]

Beyond these imperatives, skills development should support SADC's broader economic transformation. Reducing dependency on raw commodities and fostering value-added manufacturing and production are crucial for sustained development. Preparing for these transitions involves aligning education systems with industrial needs, promoting entrepreneurship and enhancing workforce adaptability.

Systemic anticipatory governance

Systemic anticipatory governance offers a framework for proactive and adaptive decision-making, enabling SADC to navigate complex transitions effectively. This approach emphasises cross-sectoral and multilevel coordination, integrating efforts across government, private sector, academia and local communities.

Building on existing systemic linkages – such as those embedded in SADC Vision 2050 and AU Agenda 2063 – anticipatory governance can improve policy coherence, facilitate stakeholder engagement and institutionalise mechanisms to address systemic disruptions. For example, integrating anticipatory governance as a core competency in SADC structures can enhance readiness for green, digital and AI transitions. Adaptive policies can ensure that skills development initiatives remain responsive to emerging trends, fostering social inclusion and economic sustainability.

Regional integration and coordination are central to this approach.[18] By strengthening monitoring and review processes, SADC can track progress, identify gaps and refine strategies to meet dynamic demands. This integration ensures that skills frameworks not only address current challenges but also build momentum for transformative transitions toward green industrialisation and digital economies.

17 International Labour Organization, "The ILO Strategy on Skills and Lifelong Learning 2030" (ILO, June 29, 2023).

18 AU, *African Integration Report 2021* (AU, March 15, 2022), accessed January 10, 2025, https://au.int/en/documents/african-integration-report-2021.

Reforming skills development in SADC: Pathways to relevance and resilience

Addressing SADC's development challenges requires skills development aligned with technological and environmental shifts, focusing on systems mapping, foresight, key drivers and adaptability.

Systems mapping and stakeholder engagement

The skills development ecosystem in SADC remains insufficiently assessed, particularly in the context of green industrialisation, digitalisation and AI. Comprehensive complex systems mapping19 of current skill gaps and strengths is essential to optimise interventions. Such mapping enables targeted approaches that bolster teaching support for vulnerable populations, enhance educator training and harmonise qualifications frameworks across the region.

Existing initiatives, including regional centres of excellence and specialised training, provide a foundation, but greater alignment with strategic goals such as the RISDP 2020–2030 and Vision 2050 is needed. For instance, green and digital skills must be embedded within industrial, infrastructure and human capital development strategies, with specific attention to cross-cutting issues such as gender, youth empowerment and environmental sustainability.

Stakeholder engagement is central to this process. Collaborative dialogue among governments, private sectors, civil society, academia and training institutions fosters collective intelligence. Such engagement ensures participatory assessments of skills priorities and aligns development pathways with the needs of diverse actors. This inclusivity is vital for adapting to rapid digital and green transitions.

Foresight and systemic innovation

To prepare for dynamic futures, SADC should adopt foresight methodologies that anticipate changes and foster systemic innovation. Foresight allows policymakers to track labour market shifts and explore alternative industrialisation models, thus equipping the region to navigate emerging trends and uncertainties effectively.

19 Complex systems mapping visually represents elements and relationships within systems, aiding stakeholders in understanding interconnections, identifying leverage points and fostering collaborative, effective interventions. See Erin Gray and Charlie Bloch, "INSIDER: Systems Mapping – A Vital Ingredient for Successful Partnerships", World Resources Institute, August 17, 2020.

Systemic innovation[20] amplifies this process by examining interconnected systems – governance, education and industry – to design integrated responses. For instance, foresight insights can guide the development of talent pipelines that meet future demands while remaining contextually relevant. Furthermore, scenario planning can uncover risks and opportunities, enabling more informed decisions about skills development pathways.

Foresight also empowers stakeholders to reconsider traditional industrialisation approaches. By envisioning futures driven by renewable energy, advanced manufacturing and equitable governance, SADC can proactively redefine economic and social structures, ensuring that skills strategies are resilient and forward-looking.

Drivers and levers for change

Structural economic transformation is a key goal for SADC, moving away from dependence on primary commodities toward value-added production. Drivers of change include a rising middle class with evolving consumption patterns and growing demands for equitable and sustainable development.

Levers for impactful skills development include:

- access to education: expanding opportunities for vulnerable populations;
- relevant knowledge resources: developing content that is locally grounded and globally competitive;
- technological integration: leveraging digital tools for teaching and learning;
- policy innovation: harmonising policies to ensure system-wide alignment; and
- leadership and funding: mobilising committed resources to drive reforms.

These levers must be coordinated to address the systemic nature of skills challenges while building resilience in education and workforce ecosystems.

Adaptable and responsive skills development

The rapid pace of technological and environmental changes necessitates skills development strategies that are both flexible and adaptive. Emerging shifts in education – such as online learning, gamification and virtual reality – offer innovative avenues to meet diverse needs. These approaches align with the demands of lifelong learning and cater to SADC's growing youth population, which form the backbone of its future workforce.

20 Gerald Midgley defines systemic innovation as stakeholder-driven processes using systems thinking to transform actions, relationships and societal structures for sustainable, multi-organisational change. See Gerald Midgley and Erik Lindhult, "What Is Systemic Innovation?" (Working Paper 99, Centre for Systems Studies, Hull University Business School, February 1, 2017).t

Adaptive strategies require a dual approach: meeting current system requirements while fostering mechanisms for experimentation and innovation. The ambidextrous approach advocated by Harvard Business School[21] exemplifies this balance, combining immediate operational needs with future-facing adaptability.

Integration of online and distance learning platforms can expand access to education, particularly for remote and underserved populations. Simultaneously, aligning curricula with localised needs and regional goals ensures that the workforce is equipped to meet domestic and global demands. Importantly, policy frameworks must accommodate flexible timelines and adjust to disruptions, ensuring continuity and responsiveness in skills development efforts.

Conclusion

SADC is navigating the challenges of economic development, environmental sustainability and technological innovation, with skills development as a crucial enabler for regional growth and advancement. SADC acknowledges the transition to green industrialisation and advancements in digital and AI technologies as two critical imperatives shaping regional development. Together, these shifts can foster economic innovation and improved efficiencies, as well as support sustainable development that mitigates against environmental harm.

This policy briefing highlights the need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of the region's skills development landscape and the importance of foresight-driven skills strategies to prepare for green industrialisation, digitalisation and AI transformations. Recommendations urge the integration of anticipatory governance across SADC to address disruptions and opportunities from ongoing transitions. Additionally, sustainable development guided by principles of social justice and environmental regeneration, should anchor skills ecosystems that are inclusive and future ready.

Further research is needed to build national futures of higher education and TVET strategic frameworks; harmonise green and digital skills policies across member states; enhance TVET; align skills with labour market trends; and explore emerging technologies such as AI in education. The call to action for policymakers, educators and industry leaders is to act decisively to invest in innovative education, prioritise vulnerable populations and adopt foresight strategies to ensure SADC thrives in an evolving global landscape.

21 Greg Satell, Abhijit Bhaduri and McLees Todd, "Help Your Employees Develop the Skills They Really Need", *Harvard Business Review*, October 6, 2023.

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