Building an AI-Ready Workforce:

A Comparative Study of Reskilling Policies in East Asia

This policy brief is part of the AI Opportunity Fund: Asia-Pacific, an initiative led by AVPN with support from Google.org and the Asian Development Bank

Building an AI-Ready Workforce:

A Comparative Study of Reskilling Policies in East Asia

Prepared by

Sounman Hong Yonsei University
M.Jae Moon Yonsei University
Naomi Aoki The University of Tokyo
Byunggeor Moon Yonsei University
Wilson Wong The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Executive Summary

CONTENTS

1. Overview

2. Key Findings

3. Comparative Analysis

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Executive Summary

1. OVERVIEW

These three case studies examine how three economies – Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong – are addressing the challenge of reskilling older workers for the artificial intelligence (AI) era. All three countries face rapidly ageing populations alongside the transformative impact of AI on labour markets. The research explores each country's policy approaches, programmes, and challenges in enabling elderly and mature workforce to acquire new skills and remain productive in an AI-driven economy. By comparing these cases, the case studies aim to identify effective strategies and lessons that can inform future workforce development policies across the Asia-Pacific region.

2. KEY FINDINGS

Japan

Japan is one of the world's oldest societies, with over a quarter of its population aged 65 and above. Many older Japanese remain economically active – indeed, the overall labour force has even grown since 2012 partly thanks to increased participation by workers over 50. The government considers it a national imperative to build an "AI-ready workforce" to cope with demographic ageing. High-level initiatives (*e.g. Society 5.0 vision*) emphasise leveraging technology and continuous learning for all ages. However, the Japan case study finds a gap between policy momentum and actual training uptake by older workers. Despite many programmes being open to all ages, relatively few senior employees participate. The case study noted a lack of enthusiasm among senior workers in leadership roles to retrain. Identified barriers include limited data on training needs and outcomes, and corporate norms that have historically focused training on younger staff. The case study concludes that better data collection on senior training and providing incentives for older employees (including managers) to pursue AI-related reskilling are critical measures.

South Korea

South Korea stands at a critical juncture as it becomes a "super-aged" society (over 20% of the population 65+ in 2024). It also has the highest elderly poverty rate among OECD countries, reflecting the fact that many older Koreans retire early and struggle in low-paid jobs. The study finds that Korea's current policy framework for AI workforce development lacks maturity and efforts to integrate ageing and AI strategies remain nascent. Recognising this gap, the study presents five strategic recommendations to prepare an ageing workforce for AI. These include establishing an integrated national AI

workforce committee focused on older workers, reforming rigid retirement age and seniority-based wage systems, expanding lifelong learning infrastructure (e.g. community technology education centres across regions), ensuring AI systems are fair (addressing age biases), and fostering international knowledge exchange on ageing and tech. In essence, South Korea's key priorities are structural reforms and comprehensive governance to better support older workers in the face of automation.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is also rapidly ageing (over 20.5% aged 65+ as of 2025), but policy action on older workers and AI has been limited so far. The Hong Kong case emphasises ground-level engagement and accessibility rather than broad policy measures. It highlights that trust is a prerequisite for older adults to participate in training – seniors are far more likely to join if outreach is through familiar community centres or organisations they trust. Likewise, language and cultural sensitivity are vital: programmes offering content in Cantonese or other local languages, using culturally relevant examples, and employing peer trainers see much higher participation rates. Furthermore, holistic support (such as providing free digital devices, internet access, transportation or childcare) can dramatically improve uptake. Overall, Hong Kong's experience underlines the importance of removing practical barriers and social stigmas so that older workers feel confident to reskill for the AI age.

3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Table 1: Key indicators and findings across the three cases

Indicator	Japan	South Korea	Hong Kong
Ageing demographic context	Oldest population; over 25% are 65+ (world's most aged society)	Rapidly ageing; ~20% 65+ (entered "super-aged" status)	Ageing fast; ~20% 65+ (super-aged by 2025)
Older workforce par ticipation	Many seniors continue working (labour force growing partly via 50+ workers); tradition of extended employment	Low official retirement age (~60) leads to early exits; many seniors in low-paid informal work (high elderly poverty)	Many older adults retire early; those working often in low-skill jobs; increasing need to re-engage retired talent
Policy framework & vision	Strong national vision (Society 5.0) for tech-driven society includes older reskilling; multiple government programmes exist	National AI strategy exists but integration with policies is immature; planning major policy reforms (governance, labour laws)	No dedicated AI-and-ageing policy; government support limited; reliance on ad-hoc initiatives and NGOs to address gaps

Indicator	Japan	South Korea	Hong Kong
Key challenges identified	Engagement gap: Older workers under-utilise training opportunities; cultural resistance (seniority norms, low motivation to retrain among executives)	Structural barriers: Rigid retirement practices; seniority-based pay disincentivises continued work; limited lifelong learning culture	Social barriers: Many seniors lack digital skills or confidence; language barriers; low trust in unfamiliar training programmes
Notable initiatives / strategies	Government promotes lifelong learning and corporate retraining; exploring incentives for senior training uptake; collecting better data on training needs	Proposed creation of AI Workforce Committee focusing on older workers; extending retirement age and shifting to per formance-based pay; nationwide senior tech education centres	Community centres offer digital literacy classes; programmes use Cantonese and peer mentors; NGOs provide devices/internet to seniors (improved enrolment)

All three cases underscore the urgency of reskilling older workforce for an AI-driven future, yet each approaches the problem differently due to distinct socio-economic contexts. Japan has a strong top-down strategy and corporate practices that keep many seniors in employment beyond traditional retirement age, but it struggles with bridging the gap between national policy support and on-the-ground participation by older workers. South Korea, facing one of the fastest ageing populations, identifies structural impediments (like early retirement norms and insufficient lifelong learning systems) as key obstacles, prompting broad institutional reforms and policy innovation as solutions. Hong Kong, a smaller city-economy, has fewer formal policies targeting older workers; instead, progress has come via community-level programmes focusing on trust-building, localised training, and direct support to older learners.

Distinctive differences emerge in their strategies. Japan's efforts centre on aligning existing workforce development programmes with an ageing society – it must convert its high-level vision into greater engagement among older employees. South Korea's approach is more about reforming systems – updating labour policies and governance to support longer careers and continuous reskilling. Hong Kong's approach is grassroots, tackling cultural and practical barriers to bring seniors into the digital skills fold. Despite these differences, all three acknowledge that without proactive intervention, older workers risk being left behind in the AI revolution.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The table below summarises key indicators and findings across Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong. Across the cases, the common conclusion is that proactive efforts are needed to reskill and include older workers in the AI-driven economy. If left unaddressed, the digital transformation could widen generational disparities, but each country's experience shows that targeted strategies can enable older employees to continue contributing to the workforce. In Japan, closing the implementation gap between policy and practice is crucial – for example, translating national AI initiatives into workplace training that actively involves senior staff. South Korea's recommendations point to updating institutional frameworks (raising retirement ages, encouraging lifelong learning, and guarding against age bias in technology) to create an environment where older workers can thrive alongside AI. Hong Kong's case underlines community-centric solutions – building trust, tailoring training to seniors' needs, and offering practical support – as effective ways to engage older adults.

In summary, the three cases recommend a mix of policy reforms, organisational incentives, and grassroots support to ensure older members of the workforce are not left behind. By learning from each other's approaches – from Japan's high-level vision and South Korea's structural reforms, to Hong Kong's on-the-ground tactics – policymakers can formulate comprehensive strategies for an ageing workforce in the age of AI.