BUSINESS + HIGHER EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMIT 2026

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Canada has entered a critical period that will shape its economic strength, technological leadership, and national sovereignty.

Across critical sectors — energy, AI, defence, and space — the country faces a single binding constraint: execution at speed and scale.

This action plan outlines the steps leaders agreed must begin now.

AN ACTION PLAN FOR CANADA'S NEXT ECONOMY

At BHER's 2026 Executive Summit, leaders identified six priority areas where coordinated action across governments, industry, and post-secondary can unlock Canada's next phase of economic growth and strategic capacity.

In each area, leaders highlighted immediate steps to accelerate national capacity, productivity, and competitiveness. Together, these priorities form a practical execution agenda for the year ahead.

1 ENERGY & INDUSTRIAL CAPACITY:
Powering Canada's Next Economy

Energy is not a single-sector issue. It is necessary to power AI, defence, advanced manufacturing, growth, and our day-to-day lives. Leaders were blunt: without coordinated workforce, supply chain, and procurement reform, capital alone will not deliver the energy outcomes we urgently need.

Actions:

- **Shift workforce program KPIs away from job counts toward measurable productivity gains,** aligning post-secondary programs with industry needs. Funding should be tied to measurable workforce gains in productivity, return on value, speed, and/or global competitiveness.
- **Standardize sector-wide training standards and credentials** through regional industry roundtables, replacing fragmented institutional advisory committees and enabling faster workforce mobility across projects.
- **Develop a nationally coordinated energy workforce and supply chain "heat map"** to guide procurement decisions, prevent labour bottlenecks, and move major projects toward stable multi-decade procurement pipelines.
- **Bring education to where projects are** by scaling "learning hub" models in northern and rural communities so that major projects build local workforce capacity upstream.
- **Position post-secondary institutions as trusted partners in expanding Indigenous workforce participation.** Leverage the higher trust barometer of colleges and universities to improve reconciliation and increase Indigenous participation in major energy projects.

2 DEFENCE & NATIONAL SECURITY:
Building Talent and Industrial Readiness

Military readiness ultimately depends on training pipelines and materials pipelines, not just battlefield strategy. Demand for skilled personnel across the military now outpaces recruitment and training capacity, at a moment when sovereignty concerns are rising.

Actions:

- **Partner with post-secondaries and industry to increase defence training capacity** by offloading non-combat training to accelerate time-to-competence.
- **Create a modern, multi-entry talent model.** Move beyond the traditional 30-year career model and enable lateral entry, exit, and re-entry – allowing skilled professionals (e.g., AI specialists, tradespeople) to move between defence and civilian sectors.
- **Establish standardized credentialing systems for veterans and military families** to increase sector and regional mobility. Translate military competencies into civilian-recognized credentials and improve portable credentials for sectors like education and healthcare.
- **Streamline government procurement** and simplify contracting and proposal processes to shorten timelines and avoid missing innovation windows.
- **Position Canada as a leader in dual-use innovation.** Expand rapid prototyping sandboxes between defence, industry, and post-secondary to convert research into deployable and commercial capabilities.

3 SPACE & RELATED TECHNOLOGIES:
Sovereignty Through Capability

Space is not some distant science project. It's core to our national sovereignty, communications systems, climate monitoring, and healthcare delivery. Canada is internationally recognized as a reliable partner in space projects, but we remain the only G7 country unable to launch our own missions.

Actions:

- **Strategically and deliberately fund more high-risk, high-reward research.** Adopt approaches that accept failure as a necessary condition of breakthrough innovation.
- **Procure innovation, and innovate procurement** through initiatives that change existing policies, try new incentives, streamline regulatory frameworks, and shorten timelines.
- **Create the ecosystem that keeps Canadian IP in Canada.** Ensure that new space-related startups can secure customers, capital, and support domestically rather than relocating abroad to grow. Canadian enterprises should have Canadian first customers.
- **Launch a fully Canadian end-to-end space mission within the next 5-10 years.** A goal like this allows us to mobilize post-secondaries, SMEs, industry, and students across the country to contribute collaboratively — building domestic capacity, commercialization opportunities, and leadership in policy.

“FOR US, GOING ALL IN DOESN’T MEAN BETTING ON EVERY SECTOR, EVERY TECHNOLOGY, EVERY IDEA.

IT MEANS CONCENTRATING CAPITAL, TALENT, AND POLITICAL ATTENTION WHERE CANADA HAS A REAL SHOT AT DOMESTIC GROWTH AND GLOBAL RELEVANCE.”

- VAL WALKER, CEO, BHER

4 AI & DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE: Moving from Pilots to Productivity

Canada pioneered modern artificial intelligence, but our firms are lagging global competitors in commercial deployment. Leaders described being stuck in "pilot purgatory," where experimentation is common but enterprise-wide transformation remains rare.

Actions:

- **Commit to enterprise-wide AI deployment within 12–24 months,** redesigning workflows, governance structures, and operating models so AI becomes embedded in core operations rather than layered onto existing processes.
- **Build sovereign AI compute capacity – and use it.** Ensure Canadian firms adopt domestic AI infrastructure such as emerging sovereign AI compute facilities wherever possible.
- **Require Canadian-first procurement where viable solutions exist,** and create a registry of Canadian AI providers to help prioritize domestic solutions.
- **Establish sector-specific AI innovation funds** (e.g. in the field of healthcare), so that firms and institutions can afford to procure and implement AI solutions quickly.
- **Expand trust in AI deployment by scaling proven, lower-risk applications,** such as predictive and non-generative AI, allowing more risk-averse enterprises to build policies and bridges toward broader transformation.
- **Measure productivity gains, not tool adoption.** Tie AI investments to measurable output, time, and cost improvements, not number of licenses deployed.

5 RESEARCH & COMMERCIALIZATION: From Discovery to Deployment

Workforce capacity has become the binding constraint on billion-dollar projects across the Canadian economy. Leaders in various industries called for talent planning to be taken as seriously as capital commitments.

Actions:

- **Convert research funding into commercialization pathways within months, not years.** Capital, procurement, and regulatory processes must be re-aligned to catch up to other highly productive economies' much shorter time-to-market.
- **Explore innovative approaches to procurement,** such as outcomes-based RFPs, which call to procure results (e.g., "MRI capacity delivered") rather than equipment, enabling new firms and services to deliver.
- **Create Canadian equivalents of DARPA-style mission funding** by pooling business, government, and post-secondary resources in focused, time-bound initiatives to execute transformational projects.
- **Treat education as investable national capacity.** Recognize post-secondary not as a cost centre, but as upstream infrastructure for productivity and sovereignty.

6 TALENT AS NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE: Planning the Workforce Canada Needs

Workforce capacity has become the binding constraint on billion-dollar projects across the Canadian economy. Leaders in various industries called for talent planning to be taken as seriously as capital commitments.

Actions:

- **Align labour forecasting with program design in real time,** with large employers sharing robust data on future workforce projections with institutions and SMEs engaging through sector roundtables.
- **Expand stackable, portable, competency-based credentials.** Enable rapid reskilling and upskilling tied to industry standards rather than seat time at specific institutions.
- **Build sector-wide career pathway platforms.** Scale tools like Ontario's energy sector career mapping initiative so that students can see themselves in real job trajectories before entering post-secondary.
- **Do away with unnecessary duplication across institutions.** Instead of every post-secondary institution trying to offer every program on their own, we must incentivize multi-institutional, multidisciplinary collaboration on complex sector challenges.
- **Accelerate institutional decision making cycles.** Leaders were challenged to return to their organizations and develop plans to "reinvent everything" on timelines measured in months, not years.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Canada's window to act is open, but windows close quickly.

Significant investment is already flowing into national priority sectors including AI, energy, defence, and space. Capital is available. Talent is strong. Institutions are credible.

What will determine Canada's success now is execution.

The commitment made at this year's Executive Summit was simple: to stop convening around shared challenges, and instead convene around shared action. The next 12 months will determine whether Canada scales its strengths, or continues watching them grow elsewhere.

The agenda is clear. Execution begins now.

AUTHORS:

Sunny Chan
Senior Content Specialist

Matthew McKean
Chief R&D Officer

Val Walker
Chief Executive Officer