

SUBMISSION FOR THE PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS IN ADVANCE OF THE UPCOMING FEDERAL BUDGET

MAY 2026

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Build employer-connected training programs aligned with Canada's national priority sectors.

Expand training programs that link learning, training, and employment, and design them around employer needs rather than program silos, recognizing that employers often require integrated pathways for students, early-career hires, apprentices, newcomers, and mid-career workers to meet evolving workforce demands.

Recommendation 2: Coordinate talent development and deployment within and across Canada's national priority sectors and major projects.

Require major federally supported projects and sector strategies to include talent development and deployment plans that identify workforce needs, employer demand, regional labour supply, training pathways, and measurable outcomes, and ensure these plans are coordinated across sectors and projects that may draw on similar talent pools.

Recommendation 3: Focus Workforce Alliances and the Strategic Workforce Innovation Fund on talent development and deployment outcomes.

Prioritize projects that expand talent pipelines in national priority sectors, strengthen employer capacity to hire, onboard, train, and retain talent, improve skills recognition and labour mobility, reduce fragmentation across the workforce development ecosystem, and generate real-time labour market intelligence.

TALENT AS NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Delivering Canada's Nation-Building Agenda

Canada has entered a defining moment for its economic growth, global competitiveness, and national sovereignty. Significant investment is already flowing into national priority sectors, including defence, energy, critical minerals, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, health, housing, and trade-enabling infrastructure.

Capital is not the constraint. Execution is.

Delivering on this agenda will require more than policy design and project financing. It will depend on whether Canada can mobilize the people required to build, adopt, commercialize, and scale at speed.

A single constraint is emerging across sectors: workforce capacity. Canada's challenge is no longer only talent production, but talent deployment, whether new graduates, newcomers, apprentices, and mid-career workers can move into priority roles quickly enough to meet national economic needs. Meeting this challenge will require stronger capacity to absorb and develop talent, alongside post-secondary institutions that can adapt and scale pathways aligned with evolving workforce demand.

Talent should therefore be treated as national infrastructure: strategically aligned with Canada's economic priorities and deliberately connected to the projects, sectors, employers, regions, and communities where execution capacity is needed most.

Canada has historically approached talent policy through a production lens: expanding post-secondary participation, training capacity, skills development, and global talent attraction. These efforts remain necessary, but they are no longer sufficient.



Graduates are not consistently transitioning into relevant roles at pace. Employers, particularly small and mid-sized companies, face ongoing constraints in finding, hiring, onboarding, training, and retaining talent. Upskilling and reskilling pathways remain fragmented and slow to adapt. Skilled newcomers continue to face barriers to full labour market participation. Even among large employers, there is limited coordination in how talent is shared, developed, and deployed across major projects, sectors, and regions.

At the same time, employers do not experience workforce needs neatly according to government program categories. A company contributing to Canada's defence, energy, housing, AI, or advanced manufacturing objectives likely needs students, apprentices, early-career graduates, internationally trained workers, and mid-career employees all at once. Yet federal programming is often organized around separate streams, eligibility rules, and objectives, with multiple program delivery partners. From the employer perspective, this creates unnecessary complexity and limits the ability to build integrated talent pipelines.

What Canada needs is a talent development and deployment system designed for responsiveness, coordination, and scale. That includes differentiated post-secondary institutions that can adapt to shifting labour market needs; faster and more responsive pathways into high-demand roles; stronger employer capacity to integrate and develop talent; and clearer alignment between workforce development and national economic priorities.

This is a systems challenge. It requires coordinated delivery.

The Government of Canada should partner with organizations like the Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER), which plays a national leadership role in aligning business, post-secondary education, and workforce systems around Canada's economic priorities. Through our [Leadership Tables](#) and employer-connected initiatives, BHER helps coordinate talent development and deployment efforts across sectors critical to Canada's future growth and competitiveness.



RECOMMENDATION 1

BUILD EMPLOYER-CONNECTED TRAINING PROGRAMS ALIGNED WITH CANADA'S NATIONAL PRIORITY SECTORS.

Canada needs more and stronger pathways connecting learning, training, and employment in sectors central to its nation-building agenda. This includes work-integrated learning (WIL), apprenticeships, employer-connected training, upskilling programs, and other models that help people transition efficiently into priority roles.

Employer-connected training programs are critical workforce infrastructure. They help students and workers build relevant skills and networks, help employers identify and develop talent, and help post-secondary institutions and training providers stay connected to evolving labour market demand.

These programs should be designed around employer needs rather than program silos, while enabling post-secondary institutions and training providers to adapt pathways quickly to changing labour market demand. Employers often need an integrated mix of talent solutions. Federal workforce programming should make it easier for employers to access the right mix of talent pathways, rather than requiring them to navigate separate programs for connected workforce needs.

WIL remains one of the most practical and scalable tools within this broader ecosystem. By connecting students, employers, and post-secondary institutions to real work, WIL helps accelerate transitions between education, training, and employment while strengthening the coordination and scale of employer-connected talent pathways across sectors and regions.

BHER brings direct experience to this work. Through its national [WIL initiative](#), BHER has supported more than 70,000 opportunities across Canada with over 12,000 companies. This experience has shown us both the potential of employer-connected learning and the broader barriers that limit the scale of workforce pathways, including administrative burden, uneven employer capacity, limited awareness, and gaps in access for students and smaller companies.



The next phase should scale employer-connected training programs, especially WIL, in sectors tied directly to Canada's nation-building agenda.

These programs should not be seen only as education or training supports, but as workforce and productivity infrastructure: a practical mechanism to help employers absorb talent, help students and workers transition into high-demand roles, and help Canada build workforce capacity in priority sectors.

This requires models that are simple for employers to use, responsive to sector needs, and designed around outcomes. Federal investments should prioritize programs that connect learning to employment, support participation from small and mid-sized companies, improve labour market access for underrepresented learners and workers, including Indigenous learners and communities connected to major projects, and accelerate transitions into priority sectors.

BHER's Leadership Tables can help identify where employer-connected training programs are most needed, where employer demand is strongest, and where post-secondary capacity can be mobilized quickly to support national economic priorities and major projects. BHER's extensive experience delivering WIL initiatives can also help inform the design and scaling of new employer-connected training models that respond to employer needs across the full talent pipeline.

RECOMMENDATION 2

COORDINATE TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND DEPLOYMENT WITHIN AND ACROSS CANADA'S NATIONAL PRIORITY SECTORS AND MAJOR PROJECTS.

Major federal investments should not proceed with capital plans alone. They should also include workforce coordination and deployment plans that connect talent development systems to emerging sector and project needs.

A critical minerals project, a defence procurement strategy, an AI adoption agenda, a housing strategy, and a trade-enabling infrastructure project require different occupations and capabilities, but they also compete for many of the same ones: engineers, skilled trades workers, project managers, digital talent, and advanced technical expertise. Without coordination, federal strategies may end up competing for the same workers, employers, training capacity, and regional labour supply.

Workforce needs must therefore be identified early, connected to training systems and employer capacity, and coordinated within and across major projects, sectors, and regions. This is especially important where national priorities draw on overlapping talent pools or depend on the same post-secondary, training, employer, and community partners.

Effective talent deployment plans require coordination. Talent deployment plans should identify:

- required occupations and skills;
- regional labour supply and gaps;
- relevant education, training, and employer-connected pathways;
- employer capacity to hire, onboard, develop, and retain talent;
- barriers to participation for underrepresented groups, Indigenous communities, and skilled newcomers;
- opportunities for labour mobility and skills recognition; and
- measurable outcomes tied to employment, retention, productivity, and project delivery.

Embedding talent deployment plans in major projects and sector strategies would help ensure that federal investments are matched by the people and capabilities required to deliver them. It would also give post-secondary institutions, employers, training providers, and communities clearer signals about where capacity needs to grow.

BHER's Leadership Tables can help deliver on this recommendation. Through tables in defence, space, artificial intelligence, energy, and health, BHER brings together senior business and post-secondary leaders in sectors central to Canada's economic future. These tables can help identify workforce needs, surface institutional and regional capacity, and align employer and post-secondary commitments around measurable outcomes.

The objective is not to create another advisory process. It is to strengthen coordination across Canada's talent development and deployment systems so major projects and sector strategies include practical, credible, and measurable workforce plans from the start, and so these plans are aligned across sectors that may otherwise compete for the same talent.





RECOMMENDATION 3

FOCUS WORKFORCE ALLIANCES AND THE STRATEGIC WORKFORCE INNOVATION FUND ON TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND DEPLOYMENT OUTCOMES.

The federal government has already taken important steps to strengthen Canada's talent ecosystem. The Workforce Alliances and Strategic Workforce Innovation Fund (SWIF) reflect a shift toward collaborative, demand-driven approaches. Team Canada Strong recognizes that major housing, infrastructure, and defence investments require direct pathways into skilled trades, along with support for employers to hire, train, and retain apprentices.

The next phase should focus on outcomes: how quickly people move into priority roles, how effectively employers absorb and develop talent, and whether investments translate into measurable economic capacity.

The Workforce Alliances and SWIF should prioritize projects that strengthen talent pipelines in national priority sectors, improve employer capacity to hire and develop talent, support skills recognition and labour mobility, reduce fragmentation across the workforce development ecosystem, and generate real-time labour market intelligence tied to major projects and sector strategies.

This is not about adding new layers of programming. It is about ensuring existing investments deliver measurable talent, workforce, and economic outcomes while strengthening the connective capacity required for implementation.

BHER can help identify the projects these mechanisms should prioritize. Through our member-led Leadership Tables, research, convening, and employer-connected programming, BHER works directly with employers and post-secondary leaders responsible for building, adapting, and delivering talent pathways. This gives us practical insight into where federal investments can reduce barriers, scale proven models, strengthen employer capacity, improve outcomes, and connect workforce investments to Canada's major economic priorities.

Maximizing the ROI of federal workforce investments will depend on the capacity to connect employers, post-secondary institutions, governments, labour, Indigenous partners, and communities around delivery. Without this connective capacity, even well-designed programs risk fragmentation and limited impact.

ABOUT BHER

The Business + Higher Education Roundtable is Canada's only national organization bringing together leaders from business and post-secondary education to address the country's skills, talent, innovation, and productivity challenges.

BHER operates at the intersection of business and higher education, with a mandate to move beyond alignment toward execution. Through our membership, research, national convening, employer-connected programming, and Executive Leadership Tables, we help connect Canada's talent system to the economic priorities that matter most.

BHER and its members are committed to this agenda: convening leaders not only around shared challenges, but around shared action. The focus now must be execution: connecting Canada's talent system to the workforce capacity its economic future requires.

CONTACT:

Val Walker
Chief Executive Officer
valerie.walker@bher.ca

Matthew McKean
Chief R&D Officer
matthew.mckean@bher.ca

