

The Future of Post-Secondary Education: National Roundtable Series Readout



**BUSINESS
+ HIGHER
EDUCATION**
ROUNDTABLE



**Higher
Education**
STRATEGY ASSOCIATES

SUMMARY

Over the summer of 2025, **BHER** in partnership with **RBC Thought Leadership** and **Higher Education Strategy Associates**, convened a national series of roundtables in Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Halifax, Waterloo, Montreal, and online. Each session brought together senior leaders from post-secondary institutions, business, government, and civil society to tackle one central question: what must Canada's education and skills systems look like to ensure a thriving, globally competitive economy by 2035?

These conversations surfaced both shared priorities and regional nuances. Across the country, participants emphasized the need for post-secondary institutions to evolve from traditional education providers into engines of lifelong learning, innovation, and civic engagement. They also identified systemic barriers—rigid governance, misaligned funding, public trust erosion, and fragmented industry partnerships—that must be addressed if Canada is to compete on talent, innovation, and productivity.

The roundtables were not intended to generate consensus, but to capture a diversity of perspectives on the pressures, incentives, and bold ideas required for change. What follows is a summary of those discussions.

To be clear, this document is an interim synthesis of our roundtable series. It is intended as a high-level summary of what we heard across the sessions, not a comprehensive analysis or a final piece. The themes and insights captured here are a starting point to inform next steps, including deeper dives, detailed reports, and future convening activities, which are in development.

We're building a coalition of the willing for this initiative. If you're keen to stay involved, please don't hesitate to reach out and let us know.



HIGH-LEVEL RECAP OF THE ROUNDTABLES

SHARED VISION FOR 2035:

Across all sessions, participants imagined a Canada that is:

- **Innovation-driven, globally competitive, and inclusive**, leveraging both domestic and international talent.
- Less reliant on resource extraction, with **stronger service, tech, health, trades, and knowledge economies**.
- Supported by **post-secondary institutions (PSIs) as engines of lifelong learning, economic growth, and civic engagement**.

CORE CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED:

- **Rigid governance and regulation:** Slow program approvals, limited tuition/enrollment flexibility, and outdated credential frameworks.
- **Funding model misalignment:** Rewards enrollment volume over outcomes, encourages duplication instead of specialization.
- **Cultural resistance to change:** Within PSIs, government, and industry; low risk tolerance; faculty disconnected from urgency.
- **Industry-PSI gaps:** Partnerships often transactional rather than co-owned; SMEs struggle to engage.
- **Public trust erosion:** Higher ed perceived as elitist or out of touch, weakening political support.

REGIONAL NUANCES:

- **Alberta/Calgary:** Desire to diversify economy beyond energy; frustration with federal policy misalignment; push for performance-based funding.
- **Prairies/Winnipeg:** Stigma against trades; missed collaboration opportunities; underused rural/applied research assets.
- **Atlantic/Halifax:** Governance and tenure reform; national differentiation strategy; possible federal funding for U15 institutions.
- **Quebec/Montreal:** Stronger public trust, but same fiscal pressures; call for culture of execution; PSIs as innovation platforms.
- **B.C./Vancouver:** Overproduction in low-demand fields; need for reciprocal industry partnerships; lessons from life sciences cluster.
- **Ontario/Waterloo & Toronto:** Aging population; talent “brain drain”; examples from Indigenous Institutes; idea of PSIs as “life design” platforms.



RECURRENT REFORM PRIORITIES FOR POST-SECONDARY:

- **Differentiation & specialization:** mission-driven roles instead of needing to be “everything to everyone.”
- **Faster, more flexible programming:** condensed degrees, stackable credentials, micro-credentials.
- **Integrated workforce alignment:** stronger employer role in curriculum and assessment; more work-integrated learning.
- **Commercialization & innovation infrastructure:** scaling IP retention, shared research hubs, and tech transfer capacity.
- **Public trust rebuilding:** outcome-based storytelling tied to economic and social impact.

BIG IDEAS & MODELS CITED

- **International examples:** Brainport Eindhoven, Tec21 (Mexico), UK’s global campuses, EPFL Innovation Park.
- **Governance innovations:** The University of Alberta’s VP of International Enterprise, donor-funded innovation funds.
- **Sectoral strategies:** National skills/talent connectivity framework, shared infrastructure hubs (e.g., agriculture, AI adoption for SMEs).
- **Cultural shifts:** From institutional survival to institutional value creation; from planning to execution; from risk avoidance to experimentation.



APPENDIX: HIGH LEVEL SUMMARIES OF KEY THEMES BY ROUNDTABLE

THE TORONTO ROUNDTABLE June 9 2025

The Toronto roundtable began with the question of what a thriving Canadian economy would look like in 2035, and what systemic changes are needed for post-secondary institutions to become a driver of that future.

- Participants envisioned an economy anchored in innovation, productivity, and inclusive growth. That economy would have to fully leverage domestic talent, strategically leverage international talent, foster commercialization of research, and be globally competitive through stronger IP and firms. To get there, post-secondary institutions must evolve from traditional models into dynamic platforms for lifelong learning, innovation, and industry collaboration.
- Participants felt that the lack of a coordinated strategy that includes post-secondary as an economic driver is hindering transformative change. There was a recurring theme that the current relationship between industry and PSIs is constrained by outdated regulations, slow institutional responsiveness, and limited incentive structures.
- There were strong calls for structural and cultural shifts to allow post-secondary systems to better support economic growth, but in order for these shifts to happen leaders in government, education, and business would need to move beyond surface-level collaboration and build real coalitions that move toward redesigning funding models, breaking down regulatory barriers, and treating talent development as a national economic strategy.



THE VANCOUVER ROUNDTABLE

June 12 2025

At the Vancouver roundtable, leaders from education, industry, and government examined how Canada's postsecondary institutions must adapt if the country is to keep pace with a tech-driven economy and meet the talent demands of 2035.

- One key concern was how education is not responding quickly enough to the accelerating changes of a tech-driven economy: for example, too many students are being prepared for public service or business administration roles that may not exist in the near future, while essential sectors like health care, trades, and tech face chronic shortages.
- Participants stressed the need for a more deliberate national strategy to steer talent into high-impact sectors, particularly through international student policies, targeted incentives, and stronger employer involvement in shaping curricula and evaluating competencies.

- The conversation also focused on the need to overhaul funding and regulatory models to allow institutions greater flexibility and responsiveness. Speakers pointed to the cultural and structural rigidity of both PSIs and government policy as major barriers, making it difficult to adapt programs quickly or attract meaningful industry partnership.
- Another insight was that industry partnerships must be reciprocal and built on mutual value, not just financial transactions. Several cited the life sciences cluster in Vancouver as a successful model of university-anchored innovation, suggesting that lessons learned could be applied as best practices in other sectors.
- Finally, the group agreed that real change will require not just collaboration but co-ownership of reform across education, industry, and government, backed by incentives that reward differentiation, long-term planning, and purposeful alignment with national economic goals.



THE CALGARY ROUNDTABLE

June 17 2025

The Calgary roundtable conversation was highly sensitive to regional concerns, while also engaging with broader questions about Canada's economic future that are common to the previous discussions.

- Alberta-specific challenges were raised, including the need to diversify beyond traditional energy sectors while still leveraging the province's deep expertise in areas like carbon management, agriculture, and clean tech. Several participants expressed concern that federal policy frameworks and funding models fail to reflect the needs of Alberta's economy and demographics, both in resource-adjacent innovation sectors and in post-secondary populations.
 - The group also discussed the lack of R&D receptor capacity and the absence of scalable support systems for innovation for SMEs. Canada must foster not only new ideas, but also the commercialization infrastructure and talent pipelines that turn them into real economic value.
- Institutional leaders voiced frustration with having limited control over critical levers like enrollment, tuition, and program design. These constraints make it difficult to respond to economic needs at speed. Several called for new funding models that allow greater flexibility and long-term planning.

- The importance of incentives also came up repeatedly: the right incentives for business to invest in education, for institutions to specialize, and for governments to align policy with national economic goals. Participants advocated for models of shared risk and reward, including performance-based funding and employer-backed programming.
- Roundtable participants critiqued the number of universities across Canada and the amount of duplication and suggested that differentiation is a strategy that can prevent competing on sameness for scarce resources.
- The Calgary roundtable also recognized that without a willingness to both coordinate and be coordinated, and a culture shift toward value creation, Canada risks missing the window to future-proof its economy.



THE WINNIPEG ROUNDTABLE

June 20 2025

At the Winnipeg roundtable, participants focused on the need to better align post-secondary education strategy and perception with long-term priorities and economic realities.

- Regional institutions operate in competition rather than collaboration, leading to duplication of programs and missed opportunities for innovation. This dynamic is exacerbated by legacy funding models, university agreements, and narrow criteria for assessing research success.
- The province's strengths in applied research and rural college systems are often overlooked in national talent strategies that skew toward larger, urban universities.
- In the agriculture sector, participants pointed to a disconnect between the industry's economic weight and its limited strategic alignment with PSIs, employers, and federal policy.
- Other misalignments exist between research and innovation directions and current national priorities. For example, participants asked how much post-secondaries are really involved in contributing to stated priorities like Arctic sovereignty.
- Another thread throughout the discussion was the growing urgency to elevate and modernize the skilled trades. The economy relies heavily on applied trades, yet stigmas continue to push students away from these careers. There remains pressure from K-12 educators and parents to value university attainment above all. This attitudinal barrier needs to be addressed through earlier intervention, clearer pathways between trades and other credentials, and better employer signaling.
- Overall, the conversation underscored that securing our economic future requires not only intentional coordination but also a shift in mindset toward global scale, market needs, and finding opportunity in scarcity.



THE HALIFAX ROUNDTABLE

June 27 2025

The Halifax roundtable focused primarily on the structural and cultural challenges facing Canadian post-secondary institutions, especially around governance, public perception, and national strategy. Participants also suggested bold ideas to radically address those challenges.

- Institutions are facing mounting financial pressures, declining trust, and major shifts in societal expectations. There was concern that many faculty remain disconnected from the urgency of these challenges or view them as separate from their roles. There was also concern that institutions have lost their “social license” if they cannot demonstrate relevance to economic and civic priorities.
- This led to further discussion about governance, including whether the sector's current models (e.g. course design and approval led largely by academics and passed by consensus) can adapt quickly enough to a changing market. Can government policy support a more centralized or mission-specific approach? The idea of direct federal funding for U15 universities to reflect their national research roles and reduce duplication across the system was raised, with the added advantage of freeing up provincial funding for regional institutions that can specialize in local concerns.
- Other kinds of specialization can also differentiate PSIs, not just by research area but by role, mandate, populations served, and program structure. Institutions should not all be painted with the same brush in a national strategy.
- Some alternative models that PSIs need to explore to remain nimble in the face of mounting challenges: short stackable degrees, changes to the status quo of staffing and tenureship, expedited undergraduate degrees for learning civic leadership and human skills before further specialization in subject areas, more entrepreneurial training.





THE WATERLOO ROUNDTABLE

July 10 2025

Participants at the Waterloo roundtable focused on adapting Canada's post-secondary systems to meet the demands of a rapidly changing economy, particularly in the context of an aging population, evolving student expectations, and global competition.

- One core theme was the need to radically rethink how credentials are structured and delivered. There was broad support for shortening the path from learning to employment through condensed undergraduate programs, embedded work experience, and integrated lifelong learning models.
- Participants flagged examples of students "hacking" traditional models by seeking faster, cheaper, or more flexible alternatives abroad or online. This hacking is both a warning and an opportunity, urging Canadian institutions to respond to this clear need with innovation rather than doubling down on the same-old.
- Similar to previous roundtables, many called for deregulation from government in order to give institutions the freedom to specialize and adapt.
- The pros and cons of privatizing universities or programs to enable more competition and freedom from regulation were discussed. Indigenous Institutes were also looked to as examples of agility and alternative models from which other PSIs can learn.
- The group acknowledged the demographic realities of Canada's aging workforce. Without new models of learning and working, the country risks falling behind economically and socially. However, there is also an opportunity for higher education to be more actively involved in redesigning systems that accommodate longer human lifespans and older people who still want to be productive and/or engaged in community and learning.

THE MONTREAL ROUNDTABLE

July 15 2025

- At the Montreal roundtable, participants continually emphasized the need for cultural and structural shifts in order for PSIs to make meaningful contributions to Canada's future.
- While Quebec's universities currently seem to enjoy higher levels of public trust and philanthropic support than in other provinces in Canada, they still feel fiscal pressures especially in relation to international student enrollment.
- There is tension between traditional academic missions rooted in curiosity and knowledge creation and the increasing demand for universities to serve economic objectives and learners' vocational demands.
- Some raised concerns that Canada's reliance on natural resource trade puts any ambition to build a knowledge-based service economy on the backburner. This does not allow PSIs to contribute their full strengths to the economy, with many resulting knock-on effects.
- Participants repeatedly returned to the theme of execution: Canada does not lack good ideas, but we struggle to operationalize them. Universities, governments, and even businesses were all criticized for lacking the structures and cultural disposition needed to scale innovation.
- Institutions need to become more agile and open to experimentation, fostering environments where risk-taking, iteration, and prototyping are the norm. But to succeed at this, they would need not only a change in strategy or incentives but a change in culture.
- Canada's society as a whole needs more spaces that allow students, entrepreneurs, and researchers to experiment. PSIs can reinvent themselves to provide that space, and to become embedded in communities as agents of change.
- To achieve this, we would need to examine and refine the role of PSIs, build deeper partnerships between PSIs and business as well as government, and gather the right data to guide these moves.





VIRTUAL SESSION (EAST) July 24 2025

This roundtable was one of two virtual sessions attended by participants who were invited to one of the previous meetings but were unable to attend in person.

- A recurring concern was the slow speed of program development in public institutions compared to private ones, caused by outdated governance, collective agreements, and regulatory delays. This limits their ability to be responsive to market needs.
- Participants noted that a more responsive system would also require data-informed tracking and foresight, alongside better tools for mapping skills to labour market demand.
- There is a need to evolve beyond PSIs as knowledge providers toward PSIs as engines of applied learning and experimentation. This includes equipping students with entrepreneurial mindsets, improving skills articulation, and fostering broader community partnerships. Ultimately, there needs to be a systemic culture shift from institutional survival to institutional value creation.
- The current tenure model and performance review practices were seen as misaligning PSIs from long-term social, learner, and labour market needs.
- Participants also emphasized the untapped potential for PSIs to function as platforms for workforce development/upskilling and digital adoption, particularly in partnership with SMEs (which make up over 98% of Canada's businesses).
- WIL should be expanded as infrastructure and should include entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial experiences. Post-secondary school-to-work strategies in general should include more integration with government economic policies and K-12 education systems.

VIRTUAL SESSION (WEST) July 24 2025

This roundtable was the second of two virtual sessions attended by participants who were invited to one of the previous meetings but were unable to attend in person.

- Participants emphasized the need for PSIs to play a much deeper and more integrated role in Canada's economic and innovation strategy by 2035.
- Rather than acting solely as education providers or research institutions, PSIs were envisioned as key collaborators in commercialization, upskilling, and national policy development.
- A call was made for institutions to be not only responsive to workforce needs but also proactive partners in shaping economic futures, including in areas like AI readiness, civic engagement, Indigenous reconciliation and self-determination, and lifelong learning.
- Multiple examples (such as the creation of U of A's new VP of International Enterprise, innovation funds backed by philanthropy for commercialization, and international education models like Brainport Eindhoven and Tec21) were given to show how PSIs can become more agile and industry-aligned.
- Participants also noted loss of public faith in higher education and the need to rebuild trust through outcomes-based storytelling based on metrics like graduate impact, not just degree completion.
- Others pointed out that public endorsement by employers would carry more weight with government decision-makers than institutional self-advocacy, but employers will only advocate for PSIs if they can actually demonstrate responsiveness to market needs.
- In both of the virtual sessions, participants advocated for better collection of and access to high quality data on graduate employment outcomes and impact. This would ensure that decision makers, employers, and the public have confidence in the evidence behind program decisions.



