



STUDENTS AREN'T CHOOSING BETWEEN LEARNING AND WORK. WHY SHOULD UNIVERSITIES?

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The debate over whether universities should align with workforce needs is flawed. Because it starts from a false choice. Students aren't choosing between personal and intellectual growth on the one hand, and preparing for careers on the other. [They expect both.](#)

The real question is what alignment means. It doesn't mean tailoring curricula to today's job postings or letting employers dictate what students learn. It does mean helping students understand how the knowledge and skills they develop at university can be applied in a changing world of work.

That wasn't always the case. For generations, the division of responsibilities was more straightforward. Universities provided broad intellectual foundations, while employers helped graduates continue learning and developing over the course of their careers.

That arrangement no longer holds. Work has become more dynamic and career paths less predictable. Students need more help navigating the transition from education to employment, and a lifetime of adaptation.

Artificial intelligence is reshaping jobs. New technologies are changing how work is organized. Demographic and geopolitical pressures are altering



labour-market demands. The [World Economic Forum's 2025 Future of Jobs Report](#) estimates that nearly 40 per cent of workers' core skills will need to change within the next five years. Increasingly, graduates can expect to move between jobs, sectors and even entirely new fields over the course of their careers.

The faster work changes, the more valuable a university education becomes when students understand how to apply what they know in unfamiliar situations.

This is also when the traditional debate over whether universities should align their curricula with workforce needs really begins to look outdated. Few jobs will remain unchanged over the course of a graduate's working life. Alignment isn't about preparing students for a specific job. It's about helping them apply what they learn across changing roles, sectors, and contexts.

The irony is that the more unpredictable work becomes, the more valuable the traditional strengths of a university education become. Critical thinking, curiosity, communication, judgment, and the ability to keep learning are not alternatives to career preparation. They're what make lifelong career preparation possible.



The university leaders we talk to in the [Business + Higher Education Roundtable \(BHER\)](#)'s membership often express the same ambition: to graduate students who leave university confident not only in what they know but in where it can take them. And for good reason. A student may leave university with strong analytical skills, intellectual curiosity, and a deep understanding of their field. But knowledge alone doesn't help students understand how to navigate an increasingly complex labour market. [Too many graduates](#) still find themselves asking a simple question: "What now?"

Graduates who are underprepared for the transition from school to work are more likely to experience periods of uncertainty, underemployment, or delayed entry into careers that match their capabilities. The consequences extend beyond individual graduates. As BHER and RBC argued in [A Smarter Path](#), Canada's prosperity depends on ensuring that learning translates into productive work.

Some of the most promising innovations in higher education – from work-integrated learning and applied research to community partnerships and interdisciplinary projects – are doing exactly that. [Statistics Canada](#) found in 2018 that bachelor's graduates who participated in work-integrated learning were more likely to land work in their field, less likely to be overqualified, and earned more three years after graduation than their counterparts who didn't.

Why? Because work-integrated learning helps students apply what they learn in real-world settings, build professional networks, explore potential career pathways, and better understand how their education connects to opportunities beyond campus. This is what meaningful alignment looks like: not replacing academic learning, but giving students more opportunities to apply it.

Many universities are already doing this in places. But the challenge now is to make those connections more deliberate, more consistent, more visible and accessible to every student. Not something they encounter only if they choose the right program, find the right professor, or happen into the right opportunity.

We hear this in conversations across the country and through [our own national work-integrated learning programs](#). A political science student wants to understand how public institutions work, but also wonders what careers might exist beyond government. An English major loves literature, but is uncertain how to explain the value of their degree to prospective employers. An engineering student wants technical expertise, but also opportunities to develop leadership and communication skills.

What strikes us is that these students aren't asking universities to abandon their academic mission. They're asking for help connecting that mission to their futures. That aspiration is not a corruption of higher education's purpose. It's central to it.

It's why the debate has been framed incorrectly all along. Universities shouldn't choose between intellectual growth and career preparation. Students don't. Nor is alignment about reshaping universities around the labour market. It's about making sure every student has the chance to connect what they learn to the futures they hope to build, deliberately and by design.

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