



**BUSINESS  
+ HIGHER  
EDUCATION**  
ROUNDTABLE

BHER 2025

# EXECUTIVE SUMMIT







## BHER'S 2025 EXECUTIVE SUMMIT BROUGHT TOGETHER OVER 150 LEADERS FROM BUSINESS + HIGHER EDUCATION ACROSS CANADA TO EXPLORE HOW WE GET HARD THINGS DONE.

As Canada's leading cross-sector convenor and driver of change, BHER felt a responsibility to spark this conversation. The stakes are high: a persistent productivity crisis, an aging workforce, growing global competition, and economic aggression from our closest ally. Small interventions or waiting things out is no longer enough.

Our goal wasn't to celebrate success stories. It was to examine what happens between vision and victory – where leaders wrestle with complexity, make trade-offs, and keep moving forward. This is the messy middle: the place where big challenges are confronted, broken systems get rebuilt, and bold decisions become real.

From reimagining talent and leadership, to modernizing institutions as wide-ranging as a baseball stadium and our immigration policy, to strengthening collaboration across sectors, BHER's Executive Summit surfaced a set of common themes. Each one reflects the kind of ambition and adaptability required to meet this moment.

### FIVE THEMES FROM THE SUMMIT THAT SHOW WHAT IT REALLY TAKES TO GET HARD THINGS DONE IN CANADA.

- Urgency as a catalyst for change
- Leadership for a changing world
- Rethinking talent for a new economy
- Expanding access to unlock growth
- The will to act



# URGENCY AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Urgency – whether driven by deadlines, economic shifts, emerging national priorities, or financial crises – can accelerate innovation across post-secondary education, workforce development, and public-private partnerships. To stay relevant and resilient, institutions and employers alike must use urgency to drive them to adopt new mindsets, align with strategic priorities, and rethink traditional models of funding, governance, and collaboration.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

### Urgency Creates a Commitment Mindset and Sparks Innovation

PCL Construction’s renovation of the Rogers Centre in under six months for the Toronto Blue Jays’ opening home game exemplifies how high-stakes, non-negotiable deadlines can foster a “commitment mindset,” where innovation, trust, and workforce agility become necessary for success. This kind of pressure can catalyze creative problem-solving, project efficiency, and trust, and is a mindset increasingly relevant as post-secondary institutions face mounting financial and structural challenges of their own.

### Aligning with New National Priorities

Canada’s emerging priorities – from nuclear energy and cybersecurity to AI, net zero, and Indigenous economic development – demand stronger alignment between business + higher education. Institutions and employers alike must build capacity in R&D, talent pipelines, and skills development to stay ahead of evolving economic and technological demands.

### Rethinking Post-Secondary Business Models

With traditional funding sources under pressure, post-secondary institutions need to explore new financial, governance, and partnership models. Université Laval, for example, has increased private investment in research. Meanwhile the growth of microcredentials and digital transformation tools (e.g., AI adoption, faster approval processes) highlight how funding diversification and operational innovation are becoming essential for institutional sustainability.

### Public-Private Partnerships as a Strategic Imperative

The urgency of today’s challenges can serve as a powerful catalyst for accelerating collaboration between post-secondary institutions and the private sector. Leaders from NAIT and BCIT, for example, pointed out that Canada’s polytechnics are well positioned to collaborate on applied research partnerships with businesses of all sizes. In an environment of underinvestment in R&D, companies that partner with higher education can gain a long-term competitive advantage by accessing innovations and talent earlier, and shaping program design.



*Sophie D'Amours (Rectrice, Université Laval), Geneviève Fortier (CEO, Promutuel Assurance), Luc Sirois (Chief Innovation Officer, Quebec), Stephen Lucas, CEO, Mitacs), Frédérique Brais-Chaput (Étudiante à la maîtrise en action climatique, Université Laval)*



*Jenny Haag (Founder and CEO, Rise), Sanj Perera (Senior Director, CAA ICON), Sean Shabaga (Project Director, PCL Construction), John Schmalz (Manager, Modular Construction, PCL Construction), Matthew McKean (Chief R&D Officer, BHER)*



*Martin Basiri (Founder and CEO, Passage), John Baker (CEO, D2L), David Agnew (President, Seneca College), Sophie D'Amours (Rectrice, Université Laval), Neil Fassina (CEO, Okanagan College), Laura Jo Gunter (President, NAIT)*



# LEADERSHIP FOR A CHANGING WORLD

Leadership is not innate, but a teachable set of skills that can be developed through experiential, interdisciplinary, and community-based learning. True leadership – whether in post-secondary institutions, Indigenous governance, or large-scale projects by industry and governments – requires clarity of vision, regulatory flexibility, and the ability to empower others to act with purpose and agility.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

### Leadership is Teachable and Contextual

Sure, there may be “born leaders,” but leadership can be taught through deliberate, experiential, and interdisciplinary approaches – as demonstrated by Université Laval’s Chantiers d’avenir program, and the buy-in from their industry partners like Promutuel Assurance who are benefiting from helping shape the leaders of tomorrow. Leadership is a learnable set of skills and strategies, not just personal traits for hire.

### Community-Driven and Collaborative Leadership

First Nations University of Canada and the National Indigenous Economic Strategy highlight collaborative, community-based leadership as a powerful model for systemic change. Leadership here is not just about authority but about serving community needs and co-creating solutions with and for the people they impact.

### Regulatory Barriers Limit Leadership Potential

A lack of national coordination and autonomy constrain how much leadership post-secondary and businesses can exercise in workforce development. Leaders, especially in higher education, need less red tape and more flexibility. Humber Polytechnic is stepping up its leadership by removing bureaucratic barriers to prior learning assessments. Humber is the first Ontario post-secondary institution to recognize all credits from the province’s 23 other colleges to ensure that students don’t have to retake coursework unnecessarily.

### Leadership as Strategic Enablement

The Rogers Centre renovation illustrates leadership as the ability to set a clear, actionable direction, and then empower others to act within it. This reflects a view of leadership as both strategic and enabling: balancing hands-on guidance with the autonomy needed for teams to be agile and effective. Leaders at Seneca College and Okanagan College point out that this view also applies to higher ed strategy at a national level: Canada needs more collaboration and shared visioning for post-secondary education, and more regulatory flexibility for individual institutions.



*Sophie D'Amours*  
(Rectrice, Université Laval)



*Robert Luke* (CEO, eCampusOntario)



*Val Walker* (CEO, BHER), *Jeff Zabudsky* (President, BCIT), *Ann Marie Vaughan* (President and CEO, Humber Polytechnic), *Meti Basiri* (Co-Founder and CEO, ApplyBoard), *Vivek Goel* (President and Vice-Chancellor University of Waterloo), *Jacqueline Ottmann* (President, FNU)



# RETHINKING TALENT FOR THE NEW ECONOMY

Organizations are moving beyond credentials to prioritize job-ready skills, human skills, and continual upskilling, using tools like AI-driven assessments and applied learning to stay ahead of workforce needs. To keep pace, post-secondary institutions, businesses, and governments alike must focus on aligning talent – domestic and newcomer – with the evolving demands of Canada’s economy.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

### Skills-Based Hiring Over Credential-Based Hiring

Post-secondary institutions must integrate job-ready skills, hands-on learning, and real-world problem-solving into more of their programs. Companies are already starting to shift away from traditional credential-based hiring toward skills-based assessments, driven by AI-powered tools (e.g. Knockri). We know companies need people with skills like decision-making, emotional intelligence, and teamwork, but we need new ways to identify those competencies during the hiring process, and to reduce unconscious bias and highlight ability over background.

### Personalized, Continual Upskilling for Workforce Resilience

The future of workforce development lies in adaptive, personalized learning – not one-size-fits-all training. Organizations like eCampusOntario, D2L, and SkillsWave are providing game-changing tech, while companies like Bruce Power, Hydro One, IBM, and others are leading the charge by adopting real-time skills mapping and AI-driven analytics to anticipate industry needs and foster employee growth. Upskilling is not just a training strategy, but essential to employee retention and long-term economic resilience.

### Strategic Talent Alignment in Immigration and Hiring

Opportunities exist to align both domestic and international talent with labour market needs. Business + higher education must work collaboratively with Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and organizations like ApplyBoard and Passage to ensure that incoming and existing international talent possess the specific, in-demand skills necessary to support economic growth in sectors that need it most. This includes both reskilling residents and more targeted integration of new Canadians.



*Scott Harris (Associate Deputy Minister, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada), Martin Basiri (Founder and CEO, Passage)*



*Rob McIntosh (Division Manager of Learning and Performance, Bruce Power), Sasha Thackaberry (President, SkillsWave), Kristina Tsiriotakis (Senior Director of Learning & Organizational Development, D2L), Robert Luke (CEO, eCampusOntario)*



# EXPAND ACCESS TO UNLOCK GROWTH

Economic resilience depends on expanding access to education, employment, and leadership for historically excluded groups. By investing in inclusive digital learning, equitable hiring practices, and Indigenous economic self-determination, Canada can unlock untapped talent, drive innovation, and strengthen long-term prosperity.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

### Inclusion is a Prerequisite for Economic Success

Sustained economic growth depends on ensuring everyone has equitable access to learning and work. Whether it's Indigenous peoples, rural communities, people with disabilities, caregivers, or underrepresented groups in the trades, the message is clear: leaving people out of the workforce limits Canada's full economic potential.

### Digital Learning Must Be Designed for Equity, Not Just Convenience

Online education offers huge potential for underserved learners – but only if it's intentionally designed to meet their realities. Risepoint emphasized that flexibility, accessibility, and inclusive design must be baked in from the start, rather than simply retrofitting in-person content for digital platforms.

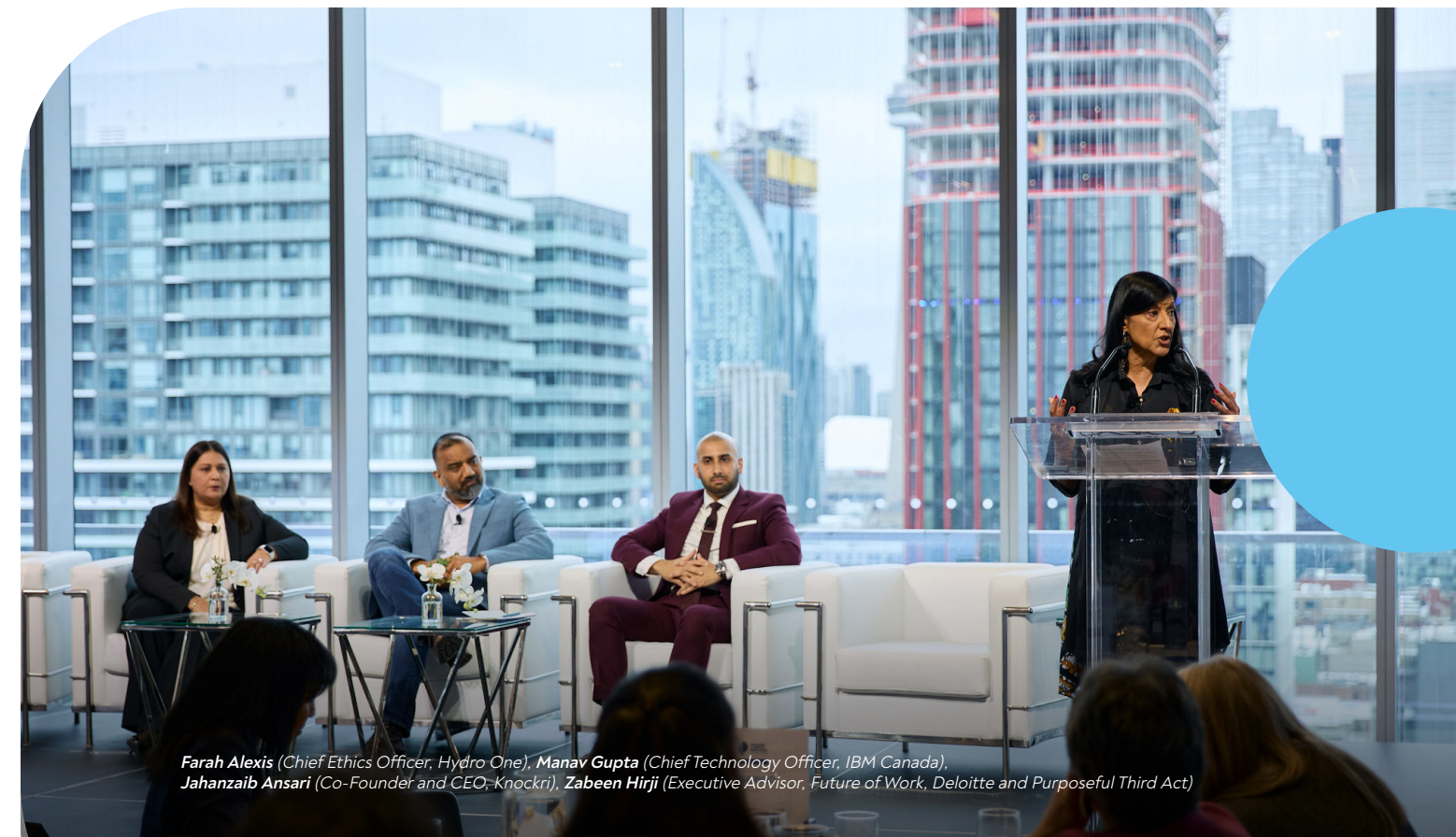
### Inclusive Hiring Practices Unlock New Talent Pools and Boost Performance

Responsible AI and skills-based hiring platforms like Knockri are helping employers reduce unconscious bias and increase representation in traditionally exclusive fields like energy trades and engineering. Companies like Hydro One and IBM are seeing quantitative gains in productivity and performance by tapping into diverse, overlooked talent pools.



### Indigenous Economic Participation Is a Driver of National Prosperity

Systemic barriers to Indigenous economic inclusion have deep historical roots, but there is now a powerful opportunity to revitalize Indigenous entrepreneurship and economic self-determination. Supporting Indigenous-led business, education, and policy reform is not only a matter of reconciliation – it's also a strategy for national economic resilience and growth.





# THE WILL TO ACT

We need bold action to break through institutional inertia and outdated policy and regulatory frameworks. Real progress will only come through experimentation, agility, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. Whether rethinking immigration, post-secondary funding, or education models, leaders across sectors agree: Canada has the tools – now it needs the will to use them.

## OPPORTUNITIES:

### Challenging the Status Quo Through Bold, Data-Informed Decisions

Across sectors, doing hard things requires rethinking what no longer works. From institutional models to hiring practices, leaders from BHER's member institutions urged a shift from defaulting to the status quo toward data-driven, future-focused decision-making. Differentiation, not imitation, is the path forward.

### Innovation Requires Flexibility and a Willingness to Experiment

Change doesn't have to be slow. Université Laval showed that when institutions embrace adaptive approaches like living labs, they can overcome bureaucratic resistance and move with speed and purpose. The University of Waterloo, too, has created academic innovation units that accelerate research commercialization, collaboration, and impact, but to make significant strides they need the provincial government to get out of the way. Across the Summit, there was a shared understanding that experimentation, iteration, and agility must become normalized within post-secondary institutions and policy making.

### Unlocking Economic Growth Through Smarter Immigration and Talent Policy

Canada's aging workforce and skills gaps demand a smarter, more dynamic immigration strategy – one that treats higher education as a key lever for long-term economic growth. As Martin Basiri from Passage and others pointed out, international graduates are an underused asset, and policy must evolve to align immigration pathways with labour market realities rather than political narratives.

### Transformative Change Is Imperative, Not Optional

Canada doesn't lack the talent, tools, or know-how – it lacks the urgency and appetite for bold action. The Summit surfaced widespread frustration with institutional inertia and policy delays, and made the case for bolder, faster moves: embracing new tech, modernizing funding models, reducing red tape, and accelerating business + higher education collaboration before the window of opportunity closes.



Val Walker (CEO, BHER), Nicole Johnson (Executive Director, Canadian Digital Learning Research Association)



John Stackhouse (Senior Vice-President, Office of the CEO, RBC)  
Val Walker (CEO, BHER)



Meti Basiri (Co-Founder and CEO, ApplyBoard)



# SUMMING UP

Change isn't only about fixing what's broken inside our institutions. It's also about recognizing when the world outside is shifting, and moving fast enough to keep pace.

As RBC's John Stackhouse reminded us, policy windows don't stay open for long, and Canada is in one right now. If we hesitate, we risk falling further behind on economic transformation, workforce innovation, and global competitiveness.

Now is the time to double down on business + higher education partnerships, push for new post-secondary financial models, reduce friction in employment and education pathways, and embrace experimentation. Canada's productivity, resilience, and long-term prosperity depend on the choices we make right now. That means building new models of collaboration, challenging outdated systems, and scaling the ideas and initiatives that are already working.

BHER's role is to convene, challenge, and catalyze – but real change happens when leaders across business, higher education, and government choose to take action.



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