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EDUCATION**  
ROUNDTABLE

# WHAT WE CHOOSE TO BUILD

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Post-secondary education isn't just about credentials. It's how we build skills, foster trust, solve complex problems, and help people find meaning.

That makes it more than an education policy issue. It's a strategy for national resilience. An urgent one. As Prime Minister Carney said to his caucus before the new session of Parliament, "we're going to have to do things previously thought impossible, at speeds not seen in generations."

Right now, Canada faces a convergence of pressures: stagnant productivity, affordability anxiety, demographic shifts, rising polarization, and declining trust in institutions. In this context, education is infrastructure for adaptation.

Post-secondary institutions are uniquely positioned to respond. They're embedded in communities, connected to employers, and capable of helping people make sense of complexity, through technical skills development, but also by fostering the critical thinking, cross-cultural understanding, social capacity, and solutions that modern economies and democracies need. At their best, our institutions not only help people earn a living, but build a life. Philosophically, there's no scenario in which we want a less educated citizenry. Practically, there's no scenario in which you're better off economically with less education. College dropout billionaires are the exception, not the rule.

And yet, too often in Canada we treat our post-secondary systems like side files: important, but rarely urgent. We debate stagnant funding and decade-old tuition caps. These choices have kept costs relatively low for students, but they've also left institutions scrambling to do more with less.

**Can post-secondary institutions adapt?  
Of course. Should they? Also yes.**

But expecting institutions to transform without changing how we fund, run, or measure them is wishful thinking. Systems respond to signals and right now, the signals are mixed at best.

We don't need more vague, duplicative national strategies or frameworks. We need to scale what's already working and create the conditions for more of it to succeed. That means aligning funding with outcomes, investing in research and innovation, and recognizing that different institutions have different strengths to offer. What's missing isn't ideas. It's follow-through and the policy courage to reward institutions that lean into what they do best and others for doing things differently, not more of the same.

In contrast, many of our OECD peers are having bolder, more public debates about the future of higher education. The UK is reckoning with the financial viability of its universities. Australia is overhauling its funding architecture through its Universities Accord. Even countries with tuition-free models like Germany and Norway are re-examining sustainability.

Canada, by comparison, has lacked a clear conversation about how to fund systems expected to drive innovation, anchor immigration, develop talent, and strengthen regions. The result isn't only underinvestment. It's incoherence.

**In our recent report with RBC Thought Leadership, A Smarter Path**, we argue that education should be treated more like infrastructure: planned, resourced, and maintained with the same seriousness as transit or broadband. That means investing in access and relevance. In institutions and the connections between them. In foundational knowledge and the capacity to build and use it.

#### **The good news? We already know what's possible.**

Across the country, work-integrated learning is giving students a foothold in the real world. Microcredentials are helping workers adapt in real time. Colleges are building regional talent pipelines. Polytechnics are bridging gaps between theory and practice. And our research-intensive universities are driving innovation and solving complex problems through world-class research.

These aren't experiments. They're signals of where our systems are already moving. Imagine how much more could be achieved with the right public policy, investment, and incentives for performance-based differentiation and stronger collaboration between business and higher education.

For Canada to compete in a more precarious world, we need to stop treating our post-secondary institutions as credential vending machines and start treating them as systems that deliver resilience. They remain one of the few shared institutions still capable of anchoring people to community, contribution, and long-term thinking.

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The risk of inaction isn't just economic. It's generational. If we continue to underutilize our higher-education systems – to treat them as background infrastructure rather than levers of national renewal – we'll leave talent on the table, ideas in the lab, opportunity on the margins, and trust in institutions, further eroded.

New global order. New economy. New federal government. New urgency and commitment by Carney "to seize this moment for Canadians, to build big, to build bold, to build together, to build now."

**The question isn't what comes next.  
It's what we choose to build.**

#### **AUTHORS:**

**Matthew McKean**  
Chief R&D Officer

**Val Walker**  
Chief Executive Officer