



Creating  
opportunity  
through  
collaboration.

# 2021 Pre-Budget Submission

## Background:

The Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization that brings together some of Canada's largest companies and leading post-secondary institutions. Launched in 2015, we have worked to harness the strengths of Canada's businesses and post-secondary institutions to create opportunities for young Canadians, boost innovation, and drive collaboration.

Since 2019, BHER has worked closely with the Government of Canada on our shared goal of ensuring that 100 percent of Canada's post-secondary students have access to some form of work-integrated learning (WIL) before they graduate.

Research underscores the value of investing in co-ops, apprenticeships, internships, applied research projects, and other types of WIL. These benefits include:

- strengthening the bonds between postsecondary institutions and industry;
- helping students transition from education to work; and
- providing businesses with the skills and talent they need.

To better understand how to strengthen the WIL ecosystem, we spoke with hundreds of students, employers, and practitioners across the country. We listened to their challenges and heard their concerns. We realized that WIL can be an important mechanism to help businesses respond to and recover from the pandemic and can also be a lever to make skills training and work more equitable, diverse, and inclusive.

We learned about the tools, resources, and programs students and employers need and we set out to build them. We also learned that COVID-19 has had a profound impact on how businesses and schools prepare Canadians for the world of work. Few expect education and work to return to the way it was.

As a result, our recommendations include goals for addressing Canada's business, education, and employment challenges in the short, medium, and long-terms.

Our recommendations are as follows:

## In the immediate term:

- 1. Extend emergency COVID-19 response initiatives to the end of the 2021/2022 Budget Year.**

Our topline message: it is too early to remove the supports Canadians need to make it through the pandemic.

When COVID-19 struck, the Government of Canada responded swiftly and decisively. Innovative financial programs supported individuals, families and businesses impacted by the pandemic.

Nearly a year later, vaccines are rolling out but the country is still very much in the COVID response phase. Canadians continue to face job and income insecurity and remain concerned about the health and social impacts of the pandemic. Canada's businesses, in some cases entire sectors, are still in survival mode and remain dependent on government support.

Canadians need continued access to easy-to-navigate social and employment support programs to ensure they do not fall through the cracks. This is especially true for groups that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, visible minorities, recent immigrants, people with disabilities, women, and youth. We join other organizations calling to extend existing support programs.

BHER's COVID response work, funded by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, includes a series of projects in partnership with stakeholders across Canada focusing on helping employers create more equitable, diverse, and inclusive workplaces through WIL; reducing barriers to WIL in rural and remote communities as well as in Canada's North; and helping to increase virtual mentorship capacity for Canada's SMEs.

Our goal is to understand what students need and the actions employers can take to build back their businesses, establish inclusive teams, and create more opportunities for underrepresented students. WIL is an invaluable way to help students and vulnerable youth gain access to skills training and work experience, especially in instances where work placements have been lost or deferred due to COVID-19.

As part of our COVID response work, BHER launched the Canada Comeback Challenge (C3) in September 2020, a virtual WIL program that has student teams competing to solve top-of-mind, nationally relevant challenges facing employers in

the public, private, and non-profit sectors. We partnered with 27 national employer associations representing thousands of businesses across the country.

The program provides mentorship, professional development, and mental health support for students. It helps them to satisfy WIL graduation requirements jeopardized by COVID-19, while contributing to Canada's response and recovery along the way.

Whether we return to normal or create a new one, BHER's COVID response work is helping to ensure that students have equitable access to skills training and that employers have access to the talent they need to both respond and recover from the global pandemic.

## In the medium term:

### **2. Invest strategically in work-integrated learning moving forward.**

In Budget 2019, the Government of Canada committed unprecedented funding to support students in the transition from school to work. At BHER, we see the impacts of those investments every day and we have been joined by partners from across the country on a mission to make Canada a world leader in preparing students for the future of work.

We also see how dramatically COVID-19 altered the playing field. Classes moved online, workplaces transitioned to remote work arrangements, businesses shuttered, and nearly 90 per cent of students reported a labour market disruption, ranging from having their hours cut to losing their jobs entirely. Some 30 per cent of students reported that COVID-19 canceled or delayed their WIL experience.

The Government of Canada can continue to support students, new graduates, and employers by investing strategically in WIL opportunities, especially for underrepresented students. Tens of thousands of placements have been generated in the two years since funding was committed. To close the remaining gaps, though, we need to refine our strategy to focus specifically on Canadians who face the most significant barriers to accessing skills training and work.

On the path to 100 percent WIL, the last 20 percent will be the hardest. It will be accomplished not through subsidies and broadband alone, but through partnerships, collaboration, and trust. BHER welcomes the opportunity to leverage its extensive member and partnership network, research, tools, and resources to help vulnerable and underrepresented students gain access to Canada's labour market and businesses find the skilled talent they need.

## Longer term:

### **3. Take a whole of government, multi-stakeholder approach to building a skilled, inclusive, and resilient society.**

In the 2020 Speech from the Throne, we heard how Canada needs better supports for reskilling and upskilling workers. We have the opportunity now to build on the strong foundation made by initiatives such as the Canada Training Benefit; the Future Skills Centre; and the commitment to work-integrated learning.

The Government of Canada has committed billions of dollars to build the thriving workforce envisioned by the Future Skills Council's recent report, *Canada: A Learning Nation*. But no single organization is positioned to do this on its own. Nor is it the responsibility of any one department or level of government. Siloed approaches will not work. We need to increase coordination within and across governments and within and across sectors.

BHER remains uniquely positioned to play matchmaker, knowledge translator, and to build a coalition of the willing. Over the past two years, BHER partnered with a number of organizations to tour the country and gain a better understanding of our most urgent skills needs. Last year alone, we spoke with over 620 skills stakeholders, largely leaders of small businesses, from Canada's largest industry sectors in every province and territory.

Through our members and our networks of stakeholders across the country, we have come to better understand the lived experiences of students, educators, and employers, their skills and talent challenges, and how we can help to overcome them. We have come to understand how government helps, where it gets in the way, and how we can work together to reduce barriers to upskilling and reskilling, prior learning recognition for immigrants to Canada, program design and delivery, and the shared responsibilities between governments, post-secondary institutions, employers and individual Canadians.

We urge the Government of Canada to take a whole of government, multi-stakeholder approach to building a skilled, inclusive, and resilient society, especially when it comes to addressing the skills and talent needs of Canadians and newcomers. And we implore the Government of Canada to engage organizations like BHER that have a mandate to coordinate, collaborate, and convene. Together, we can meet the challenges of the COVID era and beyond.