

# What We Heard: National Defence Research Roundtable

Higher Education Strategy  
Associates & Carleton University

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## WHAT WE HEARD

# National Defence Research Roundtable

On March 23, 2026, the National Defence Research Roundtable (NDRR) convened a one-day meeting at Carleton University, bringing together over 125 leaders from:

- 40 post-secondary institutions
- National research centers
- National and provincial organizations and advocacy groups
- Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)
- Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC)
- Government of Quebec
- Royal Canadian Navy
- Office of the Chief Science Advisor
- Public Safety Canada
- Department of National Defence
- Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED)
- Industry and incubators

Building on our December 2025 meeting, which explored international models for organizing and funding national defence and security research, this meeting of the NDRR focused on integrating whole-of-society models of defence (“Total Defence” or “civil defence”) into the post-secondary ecosystem, and challenged participants to consider how the sector can coordinate its defence-related efforts. Over the course of the day, participants:

- Heard from key leaders of Campus Total Defence, a strategic collaboration between post-secondary institutions in Sweden,
- Engaged with Canadian experts around the realities of adopting a whole-of-society model, and,
- Discussed the barriers to and possibilities for sector-wide coordination in Canada.

### CAMPUS TOTAL DEFENCE

Campus Total Defence is a strategic collaboration between 37 Swedish post-secondary institutions aimed at strengthening Sweden’s “total defence” through education and research. The initiative brings together academia, government, industry, and civil society into a national network, creating a robust platform for collaboration on total defence research and education. This network:

- Creates a platform for multi-sectoral collaboration in the field of crisis preparedness and total defence,
- Cataloguing and making visible educational offerings related to total defence through a central platform,
- Identifying strategically important knowledge areas and supporting the development of research in these fields through university-based research hubs/networks in cooperation with external stakeholders.

“Total defence refers to all essential societal activities to be conducted in the event of heightened preparedness and war. Total defence consists of two parts – military and civil. Civil defence includes individuals, authorities, companies, and organisations. Together, these actors ensure that society can continue to function even in heightened preparedness and war by protecting the civilian population, ensuring essential societal functions, maintaining necessary supplies, and contributing to the military defence’s capabilities in the event of armed attack or war in our surroundings.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Erik Krång, 2025. Chalmers University, <https://www.chalmers.se/en/current/news/campus-total-defence-chalmers-contribution-to-swedens-security/>

## Reactions to Campus Total Defence

In discussions throughout the day, participants shared their reactions to this model. Participants were impressed by the speed at which this network of institutions was created and mobilized, and the fact that all but one post-secondary institution in the country was actively participating in the initiative. This sector-wide buy-in enabled a kind of coordination that:

- Operated with a shared set of expectations for how post-secondary institutions will engage one another and contribute to shared activities,
- Leveraged the existing strengths and characteristics (i.e. size, infrastructure, geography, research or teaching intensity, etc.) of each participating institution,
- Created multi-institutional thematic research hubs that enabled the sharing of resources, talent, and equipment between researchers and institutions, and,
- Enabled the creation of a central catalogue of credentials and courses related to total defence across the country.

Participants also noted that this buy-in – while noteworthy – was not the only enabling factor for such an initiative. While the initiative got off the ground without funding, Campus Total Defence currently receives a modest amount of government funding to support its core activities and is able to provide seed funding to support its research networks. While Campus Total Defence began its work without funding, some participants were adamant that funding would be a precursor to the creation of any similar initiative in Canada.

Participants also articulated a number of challenges or barriers to coordination in the Canadian context. Funding issues across the sector were noted as a potentially significant barrier to participation in new initiatives for many institutions. Likewise, in a financially constrained ecosystem, inter-institutional competition for resources, talent, and students poses a significant cultural barrier to coordination. Participants also expressed that the sector was missing three key prerequisites to coordination: articulation and equivalency frameworks that support inter-institutional learning and movement, asset mapping (research and educational offerings), and a national organization equipped to advocate for and convene the whole of the post-secondary sector (i.e. all types of institutions).

In a broader sense, geography and the structure of our political system also creates some real and perceived barriers to coordination. The sheer size of the country makes convening and coordinating the sector from

coast-to-coast-to-coast a daunting task. Participants also rightly noted that any such efforts must be bilingual if they are to be truly national. Some participants raised that while defence is a federal issue, post-secondary education is provincial, which may cause problems in aligning priorities and funding mechanisms. Others raised concerns about a real or perceived lack of desire to leverage resources from one region in Canada to another and how that might impact the ability to collaborate between institutions.

Throughout the day, participants also spoke at length about political fragmentation and potential pushback or resistance to increased focus on defence. The framing of post-secondary engagement in the defence ecosystem was felt to be critical to the success of any kind of coordination initiative in Canada; participants felt strongly that emphasizing the human and civic engagement elements and the focus on public safety and resiliency would be critical to creating widespread buy-in.

## What We Heard: Coordination

Participants gave a frank assessment of the current state of coordination (on any issue) in the Canadian post-secondary sector: it is limited to non-existent. Where some examples of coordination exist, they are limited in scope and the number of institutions involved – with the notable exception of the work of the Canadian Military, Veteran and Family Connected Campus Consortium (CMVF3C). As described above, a number of real and perceived challenges to coordination exist in the Canadian post-secondary sector, let alone to the rapid organization and mobilization demonstrated in Sweden. However, there was still widespread agreement in these discussions that the Canadian post-secondary sector needs coordination around national defence and security – even, and perhaps especially, in the face of these cultural, structural, and financial challenges.

Participants were asked to explore what coordination could look like in the Canadian context. Three recurring and complementary ideas came up in these conversations:

1. Defence leads or central points of contact: Participants articulated the need for post-secondary institutions and stakeholder organisations to designate a lead or point of contact for defence in order to facilitate meaningful inter-institutional collaboration. Participants felt that this would be practically necessary and suggested that it could improve flows of information between and within institutions.
2. Research networks/hubs: The research hub model created by Campus Total Defence resonated participants, who expressed the desire to see research networks or hubs that could coordinate activities between institutions, pool resources within shared

research areas, facilitate external stakeholder engagement with their research area, and communicate and coordinate with other networks/hubs.

3. A national coordinating body or secretariat: Participants articulated that while there is significant enabling work to do before the Canadian post-secondary sector can realize a strategic initiative of the scale of Campus Total Defence, there is a need to establish an initial leadership group of institutions willing to attempt the work of building relationships with government and defence stakeholders, convening the sector, and setting collective objectives. Participants emphasized that this body would need to be representative of the whole of the sector, not just one type or size of institution.

## What We Heard: Enabling Long-Term Strategic Initiatives

If sector-wide coordination is the long-term goal, there is significant enabling work the sector can undertake in the short-term to get there. To be effective, that work must be collective, not siloed.

While the discussions throughout the day touched on a wide range of enabling actions the sector (and its friends in government and industry) can and/or should take, the following actions came up most frequently:

- Socializing civil defence, public safety and emergency preparedness, and civilian resiliency as core to post-secondary engagement with defence,
- Asset mapping existing defence-related expertise, resources, connections, equipment, educational offerings, and research across the sector,

- Identifying existing frameworks and organisations that can be leveraged to support inter-institutional collaboration,
- Fostering a culture of inter-institutional collaboration within individual institutions,
- Supporting and participating in networked activities,
- Developing articulation and equivalency agreements,
- Engaging in international defence-related collaborations and opportunities for knowledge exchange, and,
- Engaging in tabletop, simulation, and other strategy and planning exercises (with other institutions and government).

Critically, the ability for post-secondary institutions to meet the moment will require system-wide enablers that individual institutions cannot change on their own. Advocacy and lobbying on issues such as funding, research support, and international students, for example, are critical to the health of the post-secondary ecosystem and have great bearing on institutional capacity to pursue new strategic initiatives. It is critical, then, that existing organizations representing the interests of Canadian post-secondary institutions continue to be part of these conversations.



## WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

There is clear agreement among NDRR participants that coordination is necessary if post-secondary institutions are going to be part of realizing Canada's national defence and security objectives. And, crucially, there is a shared understanding that post-secondary institutions cannot wait for "government to tell [them] what to do – [they] must be the masters of [their] own fates" (anonymous NDRR participant, March 23, 2026).

Building on the lesson learned from Campus Total Defence, the key takeaways from this meeting are that:

- Coordination is a necessary next step if the post-secondary sector wants to engage meaningfully and long-term with the defence ecosystem,
- Any efforts to coordinate must be led by institutions,
- The sectoral conditions will never be "perfect" for undertaking a new strategic initiative and enabling work will always be necessary, and,
- This is the opportune moment for Canadian post-secondary leaders who wish to shape the defence ecosystem to step forward and lead.