

Defence Ready Strategic Leadership Cohort



In recent years, the Government of Canada has outlined new ambitions for national defence, security, and sovereignty, with significant new investments in research and development and a broader commitment to education and training in high-demand areas as part of the Defence Industrial Strategy. It is clear that Canadian colleges, universities, and polytechnics have a critical role to play in realizing these ambitions; the future of defence research and development will be led by our researchers and the workforce that powers these ambitions will be educated in our institutions. However, this new defence strategy has come with little guidance, direction, or support for post-secondary institutions hoping to engage in the defence ecosystem. So, where do we go from here?

Building a sustainable and successful defence and security ecosystem requires long-term vision, planning, and the organizational structures and capabilities to deliver. If post-secondary institutions want to be drivers of Canada's burgeoning defence, security, and sovereignty ecosystem, they will need to proactively articulate their ambitions and demonstrate institutional readiness and capacity to achieve them. Doing so requires more than a short-term pivot towards defence research. Institutions need durable strategies, partnerships and relationships that embed them within the defence ecosystem and demonstrate their value and capabilities in this space. Doing this effectively will require institutional leadership to accelerate the speed of change within their institutions and to set and build towards clear long-term strategic objectives. Institutional leaders will need to accelerate change while building toward clear, long-term strategic objectives.

Universities, colleges, and polytechnics across Canada are already engaged in some of this work, but it often unfolds in isolation. HESA believes in the need to bring efforts together, learn together, and imagine what the future of Canadian defence learning, research, and innovation looks like. We are convening the Defence Ready Strategic Leadership Cohort to create a space for institutional leaders to have critical conversations, identify and break down barriers to defence readiness, and learn from experts – and one another – to accelerate change.

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Over nine months, HESA will deliver nine members-only virtual meetings, each focused on a core strategic dimension of defence readiness. Members will also receive thematic reports, resources, and access to guest speakers. Reports will synthesize current research, Canadian and international case studies, and insights from senior leaders across academia, industry, and government. Each meeting will be facilitated by Alex Petit-Thorne (Senior Associate & Project Lead) and Alex Usher (President), creating space for confidential discussion, peer learning, and expert exchange under Chatham House Rules. We anticipate select meetings will also feature leaders from across the defence ecosystem in Canada and abroad.

Through participation in the Defence Ready Strategic Leadership Cohort, member institutions will gain:

- Peer-informed approaches grounded in real-world institutional experience
- Insights into partnership models and relationship-building with government and industry
- Frameworks for mapping stakeholders and communicating institutional value
- Strategic approaches tailored to different institutional contexts, priorities, and strengths
- Strategies for organizational adaptation and campus stakeholder engagement
- Building blocks for developing long-term institutional strategy

As with all HESA work, this project is grounded in learning together through evidence-based analysis, imagining the future of the sector together, and supporting informed and aspirational institutional strategy development.

The Defence Ready Strategic Leadership Cohort is structured around a provisional set of themes, moving institutions from learning about defence readiness, organizational adaptation and stakeholder management through to imagining the future of the defence ecosystem and how institutions prepare proactively to lead that future. For example:

Building Defence Readiness:

Institutional structures for defence research and learning
Common institutional barriers and challenges
Identifying and building relationships with government and industry
Building connections with the CAF and supports for military-connected learners and researchers
Working with provincial partners

Developing Institutional Defence Strategy:

Exploring what the future of the defence research and learning ecosystem could look like and the role post-secondary institutions should play
Identifying strategic opportunities across different institutional contexts
Setting long-term objectives and priorities

Operationalizing Defence Strategy:

Building buy-in and campus stakeholder management
Navigating campus tensions and academic freedom
Communicating the institutional value proposition to industry R&D partners
Positioning institutions strategically and building long-term partnerships
Collaborating with other post-secondary institutions

The Defence Ready Strategic Leadership Cohort is offered through an institutional membership model priced at \$9,000 per institution. Membership includes nine strategy briefs, accompanying resources, and nine closed-door meetings. Institutions may designate up to five senior leaders to participate.

Get in touch

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