



BUSINESS COUNCIL  
OF ALBERTA

TASK FORCE REPORT JUNE 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Skilled by Design: A Blueprint for Alberta's Future Workforce

Building the Most Adaptable, Innovative &  
Progressive Workforce in Canada



# Work is about people.

This report is about people. It is a blueprint for a future where all Albertans, our businesses and the economy thrive. **By embracing diversity, innovation and new ideas, Alberta will become the place where the brightest minds come together and solve the world's biggest challenges.**

Our goal is to create the best, most skilled, technologically sophisticated, progressive and adaptable workforce in the country. Alberta will be a place where people collaborate across businesses, industries and sectors. We build bridges, engage and solve problems together—making life better for people.

## Built and Powered by Design

Education is the world's most powerful force for achieving equality and social mobility—it is the great equalizer. As well, lifelong training and skills upgrading creates opportunity and resiliency for people in the face of accelerating technological change. Moreover, a quality job provides a solution to poverty, increases prosperity and provides a path to self-actualization.

When education and skills training are designed and built with intention, opportunities for meaningful employment improve for everyone. When these three things—education, skills training and employment—work in harmony, they drive shared prosperity, opportunity, equity and are an engine for our economy. We call it: the opportunity engine.

We need that engine now—because Alberta has three big problems to overcome:

- **An unemployment problem**—We are experiencing historic levels of unemployment, particularly with youth, a challenge that has only been magnified since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **A talent problem**—Even with double digit unemployment, Alberta is consistently under skilled in the talents needed for the future economy. Thousands of jobs remain open, but without people with the skills to fill them.
- **A reputation problem**—Perceptions that Alberta is traditional, intolerant and closed to new ideas hurt our province. Inaccurate as they may be, perception can shape reality.

*When education and skills training are designed and built with intention, opportunities for meaningful employment improve for everyone.*

This report provides antidotes to all three, and the solution can be summarized in three bold ideas:

- **Build a Better Alberta:** Become a place that provides a platform to solve the world's biggest challenges, opportunity for youth and a place of inclusion for all people.
- **Create a Culture of Lifelong Learning:** Build a highly employable and adaptable workforce, enabled by an attitude of lifelong learning and supported by a strong framework of micro-credentialing programs.
- **Expand Experience-Based Training:** Formal education is just one part of the process. Real work experience is a catalyzing ingredient that increases the effectiveness of every other measure for all involved.

While the recommendations here are focused on Alberta, several require the co-operation of the federal government, and many of the ideas have broad applicability to all of Canada.





## Big Ideas

These strategies may sound good in principle, but what action is going to be taken to make them happen? There are over 50 specific recommendations in this report—for government, post-secondary institutions, for businesses and even for the Business Council of Alberta.

These are three big ideas that deserve special attention:

- Explore potential for an annual **A-prize public competition** to incentivize individuals, businesses and other organizations to develop innovative and effective solutions and technologies to solve the biggest challenges the world faces today.
- Expand and create **new micro-credentialing programs** to allow people to rapidly adapt and develop the skills they need to be highly employable in the jobs of the future.
- Conduct **diversity & inclusion** training for Alberta CEOs and **develop progressive and equitable hiring practices** at the staff, management and leadership levels.

## What's Different This Time?



*Alberta is ready to become a place where talented people work together to create new opportunities and solve the toughest problems.*

**– Dawn Farrell, President & CEO, TransAlta Corporation**

This is about business, governments and people working together on these challenges.

This report does not simply tell governments what they should do. Yes, it advocates for policy improvements, but it is also an offer and a commitment by some of the most significant companies in the province to take meaningful action. The report itself is written, and endorsed, by the chief executives of those companies.



## Start with the End in Mind



*If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else.*

–Yogi Berra

To chart an effective series of policy solutions, we began with three end goals:

**End goal 1:** Alberta exemplifies innovation, inclusivity and entrepreneurship. It is recognized as the place where Canada's most talented workers solve the world's biggest challenges.

**End Goal 2:** Alberta has a strong culture of lifelong learning, leading to a resilient and highly employable workforce and enabled by a recognized, integrated system of micro-credentialing.

**End Goal 3:** All Alberta post-secondary students have access to some form of work-integrated learning before they graduate.

## Key Actions

Creating change is about action. Here are the key actions we should tackle first.

### Innovation reputation



*Don't follow the crowd, let the crowd follow you.*

– Margaret Thatcher

**Alberta needs to re-energize its faded reputation for innovation and economic dynamism.** In the past, the province was widely considered to be a place where ingenuity, ambition and hard work were prized—a place where people and businesses met challenges head-on and achieved remarkable results. Regaining that perception is critical to attracting and retaining investment and the best and brightest workers. It is critical to our future economic recovery.

Alberta businesses are leaders in innovation—including in clean energy and climate change. The oil and gas sector, which is often painted as an “old fashioned” industry, conducts an estimated 75% of all clean technology research in Canada. We must recommit to this innovation and energize it into every sector.

Young workers are attracted to jobs that let them solve problems and make a difference in the world. Whether it is research and development of vaccines, climate and clean energy solutions, agricultural sustainability or any of a number of other issues, **if you want to be on the front line of changing the world, Alberta is the place to do it.**

#### ***The opportunity:***

- By energizing and re-committing to innovation, Alberta can simultaneously attract and retain the most talented people, inspire and catalyze the spirit of Albertans and solve the world's biggest challenges. As we have before.



**Bold idea:**

- **Business and the provincial government:** Create a visionary Alberta A-Prize, co-funded by the province and the business community aimed at developing creative solutions to the world's most intractable challenges.

## Diversity is not an option



*I think women can save civilization.*  
– Judge Emily Murphy, Famous Five

**It is essential to Alberta's future workforce.** Diversity—in opinions, skills, backgrounds, ages, identities and orientations—is linked to innovation, higher productivity and higher revenues. Diverse voices help us make better decisions.

*Alberta was built on the principle that if you had good ideas and were willing to work hard, you were welcome here.*

Alberta was built on the principle that if you had good ideas and were willing to work hard, you were welcome here. Over time, that welcoming reputation has faded. It needs to be restored and enhanced. Alberta needs to be, and be seen as, open, inclusive and dynamic.

The economic shutdown and recovery post-COVID-19 presents Alberta with that opportunity, not skirting around the edges or inauthentically making gestures, but facing head-on the issues and perceptions that need to be addressed.

**The opportunity:**

- By improving its reputation as a diverse and welcoming place, Alberta will expand its access to the world's best talent and enable them to reach their fullest potential. Business long ago realized this can be a significant competitive advantage over those who, through lack of diversity, exclude themselves from a large portion of the smartest people in the world.

**Bold idea:**

- **Business:** Alberta businesses need to be Canada's leaders in developing and implementing inclusive, equitable and non-discriminatory hiring, pay and operational practices.



## Micro-credentials; big impact



*Decide in your heart of hearts what really excites and challenges you, and start moving your life in that direction.*

**– Chris Hadfield**

The skills our economy needs are changing, fast. In the coming decade, 50% of Canadian jobs will undergo a significant overhaul of the skills they need. The half-life of a professional skill is now just six years.

We need a better way to allow both businesses and people to be nimble, adaptable and resilient in the face of technological change. We believe the best way to do so is to expand the availability and recognition of micro-credentialing programs across the province.

Micro-credentialing programs break down continuous learning into bite-sized pieces. Micro-credentials are essentially a way to modernize education. When done well, they are:

- Fast to develop and fast to complete
- Focused on only the skills you need
- Challengeable
- Standard across institutions
- Accepted broadly by business
- Stackable towards a diploma or degree

Today, there is an overlapping, non-standard, non-stackable system of micro-credentialing in Alberta. Some are being done well, others less so; and few are widely recognized across the range of employers who want those skillsets.

### ***The opportunity:***

- People in Alberta can reach new heights and grow their own prosperity by having their skills match the jobs of the future. Alberta can create a rapidly adapting, highly employable workforce. All delivered through a more nimble and efficient system for education.

### ***Bold ideas:***

- **Businesses:** Work together to create a list of at least 15 new micro-credential program opportunities to present to post-secondary institutions and the Alberta government by the end of 2021.
- **Provincial government:** Work with post-secondary institutions in Alberta to break down existing degree and diploma programs into small portions that could be micro-credentialed. Students would receive formal recognition for each step completed.



## Experience matters

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*At the end of the day, what you bring to the table will change the field that you're in and no one can bring that except for you.*  
– Eugenia Duodu

Work-integrated learning (WIL) initiatives such as apprenticeships, internships and co-op programs have game-changing properties. When done right, all parties win. Employers get a pipeline of high-quality and often cost-effective talent. Students get real-world experience and increase their likelihood of getting a job. Governments and society get a much higher ROI on our collective investment in training.

*Companies stand to benefit from new ideas as much as students benefit from work placements.*

Experience-based training is not a one-way street. Companies stand to benefit from new ideas as much as students benefit from work placements. Unfortunately, we estimate that in Canada, only 55% of graduating students are involved in some kind of work learning—and the data and tracking on that is sparse.

The delivery of more effective WIL programs will require a three-way partnership between the government, post-secondary institutions and the business community.

### **The opportunity:**

- By integrating work with learning in every Alberta post-secondary program, we can improve job success for students, workforce quality for employers and return on investment for our overall education and training system.

### **Bold idea:**

- **Business:** Work together to identify and develop a list of 10 proposed new WIL occupations/programs to the Alberta government by the end of 2021. This list will include new non-technical occupations and programs that could benefit from incorporating a WIL component.



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