



LEVELLING UP

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF UNIVERSITY
CONTINUING EDUCATION IN ADVANCING
WORKFORCE RESILIENCE, BUILDING A
LEARNING SOCIETY, AND FOSTERING EQUITY IN
CANADA

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CAUCE
Canadian Association for
University Continuing Education

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LEGACY AND LEADERSHIP: A CENTURY OF PURPOSE IN UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION

University Continuing Education (UCE) in Canada has long played a vital role in the country's higher education landscape. Rooted in the extension education movement of the early 20th century, these units have evolved over the past century to become indispensable drivers of workforce development, community engagement, and knowledge mobilization. Originally conceived as a means to expand university access beyond traditional academic audiences, UCE has consistently prioritized accessibility and responsiveness.

As the societal embrace of postsecondary education has broadened, encompassing both economic growth and lifelong learning, so too has the role of UCE. Over the past two decades, UCE units have become valued for the nimbleness and responsiveness sought by institutions, employers, and policymakers. It is often within these units that educational opportunities for working and transitioning adults, including mid- to late-career professionals and internationally educated professionals seeking to bridge and advance their skills in a Canadian context are most effectively pursued.

This promise is anchored in pragmatism. UCE units leverage the disciplinary depth, research capacity, and credibility of their host universities to design and deliver applied, career-focused programming. These offerings are grounded in evidence-based practice, developed in collaboration with employers and partners across sectors, and refined through ongoing assessment and innovation. Furthermore, UCE has also played a pivotal role in advancing equity and access, reaching underserved communities and addressing unmet needs across regions. Thirdly, UCE units have consistently pioneered innovations in program delivery, embracing distance education and online learning: they had led in MOOCs and various forms of credential innovation. They were instrumental in guiding emergency online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating their agility and centrality in moments of national need. And now, they are exploring the transformative potential of generative AI to enrich and personalize adult learning experiences.

Through their ability to balance academic rigour with workforce responsiveness, UCE units have become essential partners in Canada's efforts to strengthen lifelong learning and workforce agility across, and in service of, all of its citizens.

UNLOCKING CANADA'S POTENTIAL: ACCESSIBILITY, EQUITY, AND AGILITY AS STRATEGIC ADVANTAGES

University Continuing Education units stand at the nexus of postsecondary education's core missions, simultaneously advancing education as both a public and private good. They expand access and create structured pathways to higher education through bridging programs, language proficiency offerings, high-quality wrap-around services, and targeted entry points for diverse learners.

UCE also plays a vital economic role by enabling labour market mobility through short-cycle, career-aligned programs designed for upskilling and reskilling. This includes enhanced and targeted support for underrepresented groups such as Indigenous learners, newcomers to Canada, and other equity-deserving populations. In this way, UCE not only serves learners but strengthens both community and national resilience.

As nimble, intrapreneurial branches of their institutions, UCE units are uniquely positioned to deliver flexible, accessible, and shorter-duration programs across multiple modalities. These offerings are intentionally designed to support learners across their lifelong and life-wide journeys. Increasingly, UCE is emerging as a vital education provider and proactive partner in broader societal and economic initiatives, collaborating with governments, employers, regulatory bodies, industry associations, and the wider postsecondary sector.

Survey data from CAUCE member institutions (CAUCE tri-annual survey) attests that UCE units collectively serve tens of thousands of Canadians and newcomers each year, the majority of whom are pursuing skills education and training. These programs span critical sectors of national, provincial/territorial, and local importance including cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, the green economy, digital business innovation, agriculture, and artificial intelligence. These are key areas that underpin Canada's economic competitiveness and future prosperity. In other words, universities, through their UCE units, are already an integral, albeit less known, part of Canada's rapid skilling and innovation ecosystem.

Much of this activity is driven by long-term, customized partnerships with employers and community organizations. UCE units not only co-create applied, high-impact education aligned with sectoral needs, but also play a direct role in community development, strengthening local economies, fostering inclusion, and enabling regional workforce resilience. Approximately half of reported enrolments are concentrated in career and workforce development programming, underscoring UCE's alignment with Canada's labour and economic development goals. The majority of offerings are built around clearly assessed learning outcomes and delivered through flexible, open-enrolment formats, ensuring that Canadians across regions and backgrounds have access to the skills required for participation in a dynamic and evolving economy.

UCE'S ROLE IN ALIGNING SKILLS WITH SYSTEM NEEDS

The current moment demands more than responsiveness, it requires leadership. The need for reskilling and upskilling is broadly acknowledged across sectors. Governments have identified the urgency of adaptation, employers continue to report persistent labour shortages, and universities are experimenting with short-form programming, micro-credentials, and modular offerings.

Yet despite these efforts, achieving coherence across the system remains a challenge. In this context, UCE units are uniquely positioned to provide the structure, strategy, and shared purpose needed to align skills development with system-wide priorities. They should be recognized not as peripheral service providers, but as strategic actors within universities and the broader postsecondary ecosystem.

UCE units are capable of leading the design and delivery of high-impact, responsive learning pathways that reflect the evolving needs of learners, employers, and governments alike. This role requires both inward and outward focus. Internally, UCE units establish clear strategies, build operational capacity, and foster cultures of collaboration and innovation. Externally, they extend these strengths through partnerships with employers, sector-specific advisory networks, and community-based collaborations. In doing so, UCE units act as translators and brokers of institutional knowledge grounded in academic quality, fluent in the language of industry, and closely attuned to regional and national workforce dynamics. This unique positioning allows them to serve as intermediaries who connect higher education to real-world needs while upholding academic standards.

UCE's high degree of operational responsiveness is further enabled by its financial model. Most units operate on a cost-recovery or revenue-generating basis, typically without government subsidy. Institutional data shows that UCE units commonly generate several million dollars in annual revenue while maintaining high efficiency relative to their staffing levels. This model supports innovation and enables the co-development of customized programming with employers and public-sector partners. Approximately 80% of reported activity across UCE units is directed toward tailored, demand-driven solutions, an approach that directly supports Canada's workforce and economic development objectives.

SYSTEM READINESS: GOVERNANCE, DATA, AND THE CAPACITY TO ADAPT

Canada's economic and workforce needs are evolving rapidly, requiring education systems that are both agile and accountable. UCE units already operate under flexible governance models that allow them to innovate quickly without compromising quality assurance. These models enable timely responses to workforce demands, particularly in sectors characterized by technological change and shifting regulatory requirements. Just as importantly, UCE units are transparent about program outcomes, distinguishing between offerings that deliver immediate, practice-based competencies and those that lay the foundation for longer-term professional growth.

UCE units also bring rigour to the use of Labour Market Information (LMI). While LMI provides valuable insights, it often reflects short-term policy pressures or speculative projections. UCE units strengthen its application by pairing LMI with contextual knowledge of regional economies, sectoral dynamics, and learner pathways. This integration ensures that new programs are not only responsive to current demand but also resilient over time. Employers increasingly turn to universities for precisely this guidance: help in interpreting shifting priorities, emerging occupations, and ambiguous skill requirements. UCE units are well positioned to provide that clarity, bringing together academic expertise, community networks, and institutional credibility.

Fiscal realities further underscore the importance of UCE's approach. As governments face tighter budgets and universities can no longer rely on revenue-side growth strategies alone, UCE units demonstrate how cost-effective innovation can deliver measurable social and economic outcomes. They achieve this through shared governance and revenue-sharing arrangements with faculties, leveraging subject-matter experts from academia and industry, and maintaining lean but robust administrative capacity. This model allows UCE units to scale efficiently while ensuring quality and relevance.

UCE units represent an established, efficient, and scalable infrastructure within universities that is already aligned with the needs of learners, employers, and governments. They provide not only responsive training but also evidence-based insights that can inform broader workforce strategies across Canada.

DESIGN FOR IMPACT: DRIVING LEARNING AND CREDENTIAL INNOVATION

As credential innovation accelerates, UCE is also the advocate for ensuring that design, and not just delivery, remains the focus. Credentials, whether micro, modular, or stackable, are only as valuable as the skills and competencies they represent. UCE units prioritize learner-centred design, developing programs that are measurable, adaptable, and co-created with industry partners. These credentials are more than marketing artifacts; they reflect demonstrable learning outcomes and real return on investment for learners and employers alike.

Learning innovation goes hand-in-hand with credential innovation. UCE is uniquely situated to pilot and scale evidence-based pedagogies that are inclusive, flexible, and high-impact. From immersive and experiential learning to competency-based frameworks and digital microlearning, the space of continuing education is where innovation in teaching and learning happens by design.

UCE thus often serves as the R&D arm of the university, exploring new models that support skill transfer, cognitive development, and lifelong learner engagement. Survey results confirm that credential and instructional innovation are central to the UCE mission. Reporting institutions offer programs in diverse formats, with the vast majority delivered online or through hybrid modalities. Courses are typically designed with modularity in mind, ensuring that they can be integrated into broader academic or professional learning pathways. UCE units are thus playing a leading role in making Canadian higher education more responsive and learner-centered. Moreover, as Canada's postsecondary sector grapples with outdated assumptions about institutional permanence, universities, like all social institutions, aspire to evolve with shifting economic and societal forces. UCE units are ideally positioned to lead this cultural shift toward agility, accountability, and cross-sector collaboration. Their success depends on a willingness to experiment boldly and to disseminate the lessons learned widely.

BOOSTING INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable funding and strategic partnerships are essential for the future of lifelong learning. Many UCE units operate with cost-recovery or revenue-generating models and face constant pressure to demonstrate financial viability. Yet, even in these cases, such models rarely exist in isolation. Units are embedded within larger universities, which provide substantial systems-level support, whether in the form of space, infrastructure, or indirect costs that might otherwise remain unaccounted for. This embeddedness is not a weakness but a strength, as it positions universities themselves as active contributors to the skills development environment.

While UCE units are often adept at assessing direct costs, indirect contributions are frequently underrecognized in planning and evaluation. Acknowledging these inputs highlights how institutional integration extends beyond operations and into shared responsibility for advancing lifelong learning. In this way, financial sustainability cannot rest solely on transactional programming. The most impactful outcomes emerge from deep, long-term collaboration that aligns with institutional goals and community priorities. This includes investment in the unit's reputation, strategic engagement with funders and alumni for philanthropic and community-building efforts, and a willingness to embrace calculated risk in pursuit of innovation. Funding, then, becomes not just a means to secure operational dollars but an opportunity to strengthen institutional capacity, build credibility, and reinforce the university's broader role in supporting skills and knowledge ecosystems.

PAN-CANADIAN INFRASTRUCTURE AND LOCAL STRENGTH: COORDINATING THE DELIVERY OF LIFELONG LEARNING ACROSS CANADA

The Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) provides the national voice and professional community through which this engagement is coordinated. A federally incorporated not-for-profit under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act, CAUCE has served for more than 70 years as a national network, resource, and advocate for the UCE sector. It represents approximately 54 UCE units spanning universities across the country.

Member institutions join to participate in strategic dialogue, share innovations, and strengthen their collective impact. Each year, Deans and Directors of UCE units gather at CAUCE's February meeting to set sectoral priorities, followed by the association's annual conference, which brings together members alongside industry and government partners. These forums create a venue for high-level conversations on the role of UCE in advancing workforce development, economic priorities, and community resilience.

CAUCE also provides professional development, research initiatives, and data insights that sustain a strong community of practice. Its 2023 strategic plan placed renewed emphasis on communication and advocacy, ensuring that the contributions of UCE are recognized not only within higher education but also by industry and government. In 2025, CAUCE and its members are identifying new priorities for engagement to ensure that the sector has a clear and coordinated voice in national discussions about skilling, economic development, and innovation.

Data on university continuing education collected and analyzed by CAUCE confirms the scale of this work: more than half a million enrolments annually, millions of instructional hours, and programs that reach Canadians and newcomers in every region. Most (ca. 59%) of this activity falls outside conventional government reporting structures.

While this reflects the agility and responsiveness of UCE units, it also represents a missed opportunity to fully capture their impact within national education and labour market frameworks. Greater visibility and alignment would strengthen the ability of governments and institutions to coordinate investments, track outcomes, and build a more connected system of lifelong learning. The results from the 2024 survey, reported in May 2025, show that enrolment growth is strong, with growth of 16.1% from 2022 to 2024. This robust and comprehensive data is collected annually by CAUCE, and helps show the impact, scope and reach of university continuing education in Canada.

Importantly, UCE units are already piloting programs in high-priority sectors, such as cybersecurity, clean energy, agriculture, and digital business innovation, that demonstrate what a coordinated approach could achieve nationally. These short-cycle programs, co-developed with employers and community organizations, address immediate workforce shortages while maintaining academic quality. They are scalable and adaptable, offering a ready pathway for governments seeking national impact through local delivery.

At this critical juncture, Canada needs a common lifelong learning strategy that unites provinces, territories, employers, and institutions in pursuit of inclusive, practical, and high-quality opportunities for all learners. CAUCE, as the national voice of UCE, provides the infrastructure through which such a strategy can take hold. By coordinating policies, connecting programs, and amplifying local strengths, UCE units can help build a cohesive and future-ready workforce development system. The creation of a truly pan-Canadian lifelong learning ecosystem requires not only shared vision, but also the institutional actors capable of making it real. UCE, working collectively through CAUCE, is ready to lead in this effort.

FROM VISION TO VALUE: ADVANCING CANADA'S LEARNING FUTURE

Canada stands at a critical juncture in shaping its workforce and education future. The evolving demands of the economy, the pressures of technological change, and the growing need for inclusion and adaptability cannot be met through fragmented efforts or short-term, transactional responses. What is required is a coherent and coordinated approach, one that bridges institutional silos, engages with employers and communities, and is rooted in evidence, trust, and long-term vision.

This moment calls for renewed ambition across the postsecondary system and among its partners. It demands investment in infrastructures of lifelong learning that are already operating at scale and with impact, yet often remain outside traditional policy frameworks. It also requires a shared understanding that learning does not end with a degree; that UCE units provide the space within universities where lifelong engagement can occur; and that workforce development must look beyond short-term skills training to encompass access, equity, and adaptability. In other words, beyond the immediate ability to perform tasks, the lifelong learning and workforce development that are delivered through UCE build the broader, long-term capacity for competence, resilience, and participation in a changing economy. To nurture a more inclusive, future-ready Canada, UCE units remain eager to work in concert with governments, employers, and communities to translate national priorities into meaningful opportunities for people, wherever they are in their careers or lives.

Now is the time to align strategy with practice, to strengthen the mechanisms that enable learning across life stages, and to commit to building a durable, inclusive, high-quality, and adaptive workforce development system that leverages the world-class postsecondary education system of which Canada boasts on the international stage. The opportunity is within reach. We must seize it with the seriousness and coordination it requires.

SYNTHESIS AND KEY MESSAGE:

Across Canada, UCE units have demonstrated their capacity to deliver education that is agile, accessible, and aligned with labour market needs. They serve tens of thousands of Canadians and newcomers each year, providing skills education in critical sectors such as cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, the green economy, digital business innovation, agriculture, and artificial intelligence. They do this while advancing equity and inclusion, supporting Indigenous learners, and fostering community development. At the same time, UCE units strengthen national economic competitiveness through partnerships with employers and industry, translating academic expertise into applied solutions.

Thus, universities, through their continuing education units, are not only education providers, but vital contributors to Canada's community and economic development. They bridge local needs with national priorities, connect short-term skills with long-term workforce development, and ensure that learning is accessible throughout Canadians' lives. With the right policy alignment and support, UCE units can expand their proven role as the infrastructure of lifelong learning, helping Canada remain resilient, innovative, and inclusive in the decades ahead.

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