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Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Training Programs

Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence

October 2026

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Recommendations

1. Create clear partnership pathways
   Establish an entry point for public post-secondary institutions to pursue partnerships related to recruitment, occupational training, subsidized education, prior learning assessment, hands-on training and other workforce development priorities. This would reduce fragmentation and make it easier for Canada's military to activate existing training solutions.

2. Use polytechnic capacity to reduce training bottlenecks
   Explore training partnerships that take advantage of polytechnic facilities, instructors and specialized equipment to create Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) cohorts, reserve seats and access bridging courses aligned with military skills requirements. This minimizes the need for CAF to build additional internal training capacity, enabling it to focus on military-specific training, operational preparation and occupational standards.

3. Activate existing talent pipeline solutions
   As the CAF determines its critical workforce needs, early coordination with post-secondary institutions will better enable the development of a defence-adjacent workforce to maintain and support military equipment and systems. Work-integrated learning opportunities and student engagement activities stand to support both military recruitment and skills development for Canadian defence contractors.

4. Build a national network of Defence Skills Centres of Excellence
   The federal government should establish a network of Defence Skills Centres of Excellence at polytechnics and institutes of technology. These centres would align regional training strengths with defence priorities, supporting recruitment, delivering on subsidized education pathways and preparing personnel for military occupations. Centres of Excellence should also have capacity to deliver upskilling and Veteran transition services.

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Context

As the Canadian Armed Forces seek to grow their number, one of the foremost recruitment challenges will be to ensure personnel are trained efficiently for critical roles in the military. Timely, high-quality training is essential, particularly since unreasonable delays stand to undermine the best recruitment and retention efforts.

The National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombud's August 18, 2026 letter on Personnel Awaiting Training found that recruitment growth had outpaced the CAF's ability to absorb and advance members through occupational training. Personnel awaiting training are members who have completed basic training and are waiting to begin, resume or complete required occupational training. As this group grows, pressure increases across the training pipeline.

CAF training is complex. The organization must coordinate more than 100 occupations, each with distinct requirements, prerequisites, locations, course schedules, instructors and equipment. This makes training throughput a core personnel-management issue.

The human impact is also significant. Members awaiting training need timely information about when and where training will begin, when they may receive a first posting, whether family members should move and what financial commitments are required. Uncertainty at this stage creates stress for members and can contribute to frustration early in one's military career.

Retention data shows why the early-career experience matters. Members in the lowest ranks leave at a rate of 9.4 per cent, more than double the overall CAF average of 4.3 per cent. At the same time, some hard-to-fill trades face long training delays, with an average delay of 206 days. These figures do not prove that training delays cause early attrition but they show that long and uncertain training journeys are part of a broader retention challenge.

The Department of National Defence (DND) has already begun taking steps to add training capacity, including more instructional and support staff across military training institutions. These measures are important. They also suggest that recruitment targets, occupational intake and training capacity must be planned in tandem.

Where Recruitment Becomes Readiness

Polytechnics are able to provide practical and relevant training capacity across Canada. They offer facilities, instructors, applied learning environments, employer-connected programs, student supports and experience working with adult learners. Activated appropriately, this capacity can help the CAF expand training throughput, reduce wait times, support members and strengthen the broader defence workforce. We are pleased to share our recommendations, along with current examples, to help streamline and support CAF recruitment and training efforts.

Enhance Visibility of Military Careers

Recruitment works best when students can see themselves in the opportunity early. Polytechnic campuses are full of learners already developing technical, digital, operational and business skills relevant to defence, including in "purple trades." These are support roles needed across the Army, Navy and Air Force, such as logistics, finance, human resources, IT and administration. A sustained CAF presence on polytechnic campuses would make military careers more visible and accessible.

As a Military-Connected College, Fanshawe provides an excellent example of how this works in practice. It provides advising, reservist and Veteran supports. The recognition of military experience make service visible within everyday campus life. This creates recruitment opportunities beyond job fairs and creates a sustained relationship with learners who may already have the skills the CAF needs.

Make Strategic Use of Civilian Training Capacity

The CAF already has a mechanism for using civilian education through the Non-Commissioned Member Subsidized Training and Education Plan (NCMSTEP). At Canada's polytechnics, some 70 programs are already connected to NCMSTEP pathways, while more than 300 additional programs align with occupations that the CAF identifies as "stressed."

A systematic review of these programs could help the CAF expand training options faster and reduce the need to build new capacity. It could also help identify where civilian education covers competencies that address military requirements, focusing training resources on those skills and environmental realities that stand apart.

Algonquin College's collaboration with the Canadian Forces School of Military Mapping shows how this model works in practice. Since 2007, it has delivered training for Canadian Forces Geomatics Technicians, facilitating approximately 190 work placements each year. Placements give students direct exposure to defence work and help build a talent pipeline in this specialized role.

Catalyze Existing Infrastructure and Equipment

Some training requires specialized equipment and costly facilities. Polytechnics maintain highly technical training environments for a number of regulated and technical occupations.

For example, the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology hosts specialized labs and hangar space at its Art Smith Aero Centre, supporting training related to aircraft maintenance. The British Columbia Institute of Technology is partnering with Kongsberg to create a national maritime simulation and applied research hub. Both illustrate polytechnic capacity in areas of key military workforce demand.

Streamline the Defence Talent Pipeline

When members finish their basic military qualification then wait an unreasonably long time for occupational training, momentum is lost. Polytechnics are well positioned to provide relevant learning in close partnership with CAF and its specialized occupational requirements. This could take the form of reserved seats, custom cohorts, bridging courses, shared instructors or access to specialized facilities.

CAF readiness also depends on the defence industrial base that equips, maintains and supports military capability. Major equipment projects, sustainment contracts, digital systems, shipbuilding, aerospace maintenance and supply chains require skilled civilian workers as well as uniformed members.

Red River College Polytechnic provides both training for specialized occupations in the military and the broader defence ecosystem. For example, its Aerospace Manufacturing program, developed with Boeing Canada and Bristol Aerospace, and its Technology Access Centre for Aerospace and Manufacturing support areas such as aerospace, advanced manufacturing, composites and smart-factory capability.

Expand Supports for Military Families and Veterans

Humber Polytechnic's dedicated academic advising, credit transfer pathways and benefits navigation, along with supports for CAF families offered by the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology illustrate how institutions help military personnel and their families navigate the civilian education ecosystem. This reduces the practical friction that members and families face when navigating education, service and transition.

Defence Centres of Excellence: A Continuum Model

Building on these strengths, Canada should consider a national network of Defence Skills Centres of Excellence that position polytechnics as long-term talent pipeline partners. The purpose would be to connect education, military training, workforce development and the defence industry more deliberately. We estimate this would cost $105 million over five years.



This model would help Canada make better use of capacity that already exists across the country. Polytechnics and institutes of technology already train people, work with employers, support applied learning and maintain specialized facilities. A Defence Skills Centres of Excellence network would give this capacity a clearer national defence purpose.

Comparable approaches are emerging among allies. The United Kingdom and Australia are investing in technical education institutions as part of their broader defence and national security strategies. Their experience shows that governments can strengthen defence workforce capacity by working with established institutions rather than creating or adding to entirely separate systems.

For Canada, this opportunity means better coordination. A national network would align regional training strengths with military needs and defence industrial priorities. Drawing on the various strengths of different institutions, the CAF would have access to facilities, programs, partnerships and local industry in ways that support both regional and national operational needs, including recruitment, NCMSTEP pathways, occupational preparation, applied training, upskilling, Veteran transition and workforce requirements within and beyond the defence industrial base. They would also help connect parts of the system that are often managed separately, creating clearer pathways from education to service and from service to civilian careers.

Complementing existing initiatives such as the Canadian Military, Veteran and Family Connected Campus Consortium, which primarily supports educational access and success for military-connected learners, the proposed network would provide a coordinated mechanism for the CAF to identify, access and expand training capacity across institutions in response to specific workforce requirements. It would also connect military training with industry needs, supporting technical skills development and career mobility across both sectors.

Conclusion

We are convinced that public post-secondary institutions – particularly Canada's polytechnics – are well positioned to support recruitment and training for both the Canadian military and the defence industrial base more broadly. As institutions that deliver advanced technical and technological training aligned with countless military occupations, polytechnics have the training equipment, expert faculty and industry partnerships that provide cost-effective solutions to the challenges inherent in efforts to expand Canada's military workforce.

As a result, we recommend a close look at Canada's existing training infrastructure such that it can be activated strategically to support defence readiness.

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About

Polytechnics Canada is the voice of leading research-intensive, publicly supported polytechnics and institutes of technology. We advocate for federal action in areas where polytechnics provide solutions for a more innovative, productive and globally competitive country. Polytechnics Canada members play a critical role in addressing some of the country's greatest challenges. Through their facilities and networks, our members provide meaningful solutions to industry problems and accelerate knowledge transfer.

ALGONQUIN COLLEGE

BCIT BRITISH COLUMBIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

CONESTOGA Connect Life and Learning

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