Policy Brief

AI-Ready Through Experience:

Embedding AI Literacy into Canada's Work-Integrated Learning Infrastructure

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Executive Summary[1]

Canada has invested over $4.4 billion[2] in artificial intelligence since 2017, yet workforce development remains a marginal component of federal AI strategy. The largest single AI budget, $2.4 billion in Budget 2024, directed just 2.1%[3] to workforce preparation. The result is a widening disconnect: nearly half (47%) of Canadian workers report inadequate training for AI-driven changes, 57-60% of Canadian jobs are highly exposed to AI transformation, and youth unemployment stands at 14.5%, double the national rate. Meanwhile, among peer nations that have established dedicated AI literacy programs, including the EU, UK, Singapore, and Australia, Canada stands alone in having no federal framework.

Canada's Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) infrastructure, including co-ops, internships, and applied learning placements reaching over 300,000 students through the Student Work Placement Program since 2017 and touching 420 post-secondary institutions, represents the country's most scalable existing mechanism to close this gap. Yet no federal or provincial policy currently mandates AI literacy within WIL programming.

This brief offers four targeted policy options, none requiring new legislation, to embed AI literacy into Canada's WIL infrastructure and prepare the next generation of workers to evaluate, govern, and work alongside AI systems before the window for meaningful intervention closes.

1. Canada’s AI Investment–Workforce Readiness Gap

As the Government of Canada develops its renewed national AI strategy, informed by the October 2025 consultation sprint that received over 11,300 participants (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2026; Baker McKenzie, 2026), a critical gap demands attention. The gap is not in funding. It is in direction.

Canada was the first country in the world to launch a fully-funded national AI strategy in 2017 (Government of Canada, 2024b). Cumulative federal AI investment now exceeds $4.4 billion across multiple federal budgets since 2017. Budget 2024 committed $2.4 billion, including $2 billion for compute infrastructure (Government of Canada, 2024a; Cassels, 2024). Budget 2025 added $925.6 million for sovereign AI capacity (Government of Canada, 2025b). CIFAR received up to $208 million to lead the Pan-Canadian AI Strategy (CIFAR, 2022). The creation of a dedicated Ministry of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Innovation under Minister Evan Solomon in May 2025 signals that the government considers AI a standalone policy priority (Tunney, 2025).

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[1] This executive summary serves as the ≤500-word summary required for briefs exceeding ten pages, per the House of Commons *Guide for Submitting Briefs*.

[2] Cumulative federal AI investment ($4.4B+) is constructed from the Government of Canada's stated "over $2 billion since 2017" in AI and digital research infrastructure (PM news release, April 7, 2024, which includes the Pan-Canadian AI Strategy, NRC IRAP AI contributions, Scale AI, and digital research infrastructure investments) plus Budget 2024's $2.4B AI package. Budget 2025 added $925.6M in sovereign AI capacity, of which $800M was redirected from Budget 2024's compute envelope (Steven, 2025); totals are adjusted to avoid double-counting.

[3] Author's calculation: $50M ÷ $2.4B.

Yet workforce development remains a peripheral component. Budget 2024 directed only $50 million to the Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program for AI-disrupted workers, representing just 2.1% of the $2.4 billion AI package (Cassels, 2024). No federal AI investment currently targets AI literacy integration within existing WIL programming.

The consequences are already visible. Nearly half (47%) of Canadian workers report not receiving adequate training to benefit from new technologies, and among those already using AI at work, most are doing so without employer-provided training, as 44% received no training at all and another 24% taught themselves (Cukier, Saiphoo & Parkin, 2024). Multiple analyses estimate that roughly 57–60% of Canadian jobs face high AI exposure (Mehdi & Frenette, 2024; Conference Board of Canada & Future Skills Centre, 2025), though methodologies differ. The investment is flowing into AI infrastructure. The workforce is not keeping pace.

For young Canadians, the situation is acute. Youth unemployment reached 14.5% in August 2025 (Statistics Canada, 2025), roughly double the national rate and above the OECD average of 11.2% for July 2025 (OECD, 2025). Among university-educated workers, one in five experienced overqualification at least once across the 2006 and 2016 census reference periods (Cornelissen & Turcotte, 2020). The Conference Board of Canada and Future Skills Centre estimate that skills shortages have cost Canada up to $49 billion in foregone GDP over two decades (Conference Board of Canada / Future Skills Centre, 2024). The most in-demand roles in Canada increasingly require blending technical competencies with interpersonal skills such as critical thinking and communication (Royal Bank of Canada, 2025), yet the pipeline producing graduates who can critically evaluate AI systems in real work contexts remains largely unbuilt.

2. The Structural Risk: Why AI Literacy Is a Governance Issue

The case for embedding AI literacy into WIL extends beyond employability. It is a governance imperative, and the risk it addresses is not the one most people imagine.

Gradual disempowerment does not require rogue AI or villains. It happens when firms and governments rationally adopt AI systems that become too entangled to replace and too complex to understand. No single step looks like a crisis, which is precisely the problem. The chain operates through normal decisions by normal actors, and because each step is individually rational, the cumulative trajectory is easy to miss.

The chain works like this. AI capability emerges and exceeds human averages on bounded tasks, with lower variance and zero downtime. Firms automate to cut costs. Governments adopt AI to solve coordination problems. Then three feedback loops kick in.

The Automation Arms Race

Firms adopt AI not because it is demonstrably better, but because competitors have, and the adoption that results is overwhelmingly biased toward automation rather than toward creating new tasks in which human labour retains a comparative advantage (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020). Bughin & Seong (2018) found that peer competitive pressure was the single largest driver of AI adoption, ahead of expected profitability. An IBM survey of 2,000 CEOs (IBM

Institute for Business Value, 2025) found that 64% acknowledge the risk of falling behind drives them to invest in some technologies before fully understanding their value. This is not a market responding to quality. When firms do adopt, the employment outcome depends on strategic orientation: Bughin (2023), in a global survey of 3,000 firms, found that companies directing AI toward product innovation saw positive employment effects, while those oriented primarily toward labor automation saw negative ones, yet competitive pressure systematically biases firms toward the latter. It is a Prisoner's Dilemma: each firm must adopt to avoid disadvantage, even when collective adoption is not welfare-improving. Paradoxically, Gans (2023) demonstrates that AI does not behave like a standard process innovation in competitive markets, adoption can actually confer positive externalities on non-adopting firms, meaning the competitive dynamics driving adoption are more complex and less predictable than traditional technology diffusion models would suggest.

Policy Lock-In

Once AI systems embed in critical infrastructure, the costs of reversing course become prohibitive. Canada knows this. The Phoenix pay system, which the Auditor General called 'an incomprehensible failure of project management and oversight' (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2018), is now being replaced at an estimated cost exceeding $4.2 billion (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2026). Phoenix was a procurement and project management failure, not an AI system. But it illustrates the broader principle: once critical institutional processes reorganize around a technology system, the costs of reversal become prohibitive regardless of the technology's origin. Internationally, algorithmic decision-making systems in criminal justice, welfare administration, and immigration processing have proven resistant to removal even when demonstrably flawed, because institutional processes have reorganized around them (Priergaard, 2025; Kronblad et al., 2024). The system becomes too critical to interrupt.

Cultural Atrophy

This is the loop that matters most for this brief. When humans delegate cognitive tasks to automated systems, the skills required to perform those tasks independently degrade. Bainbridge (1983) identified the "ironies of automation": the more advanced the automation, the more critical, and the less practised, human oversight skills become. GPS navigation degrades spatial memory (Dahmani & Bohbot, 2020). Frequent AI tool usage shows a significant negative correlation with critical thinking abilities, mediated by increased cognitive offloading (Gerlich, 2025). Students with lower AI literacy demonstrate less sophisticated cognitive engagement and more limited prompt strategies during AI-assisted writing (Kim et al., 2025; n = 19). Each generation of workers has less capacity than the last to evaluate the systems they depend on.

These three loops reinforce each other. The arms race accelerates adoption before governance frameworks exist. Lock-in prevents removal once problems emerge. Atrophy degrades the human skills needed to operate without AI, which makes AI appear even more indispensable, which accelerates the next round of adoption. Kulveit et al. (2025, preprint) argued that even incremental AI capability increases, without any coordinated power-seeking, pose substantial risk of human disempowerment.

The OECD Employment Outlook (2023, Ch. 6) put it plainly: “delaying such action could result in negative impacts on society, employers and workers.” The intervention window is not indefinite.

> *To be clear, this brief does not propose stopping AI capability development. The concern is the three feedback loops, and specifically cultural atrophy, where intervention is still possible. The defensive layer targets cultural atrophy, to prevent the point where we can no longer understand systems well enough to replace them, even if we could technically turn them off.*

If workers entering the labour force possess the AI literacy to evaluate, question, and redirect AI systems in their workplaces, the cultural atrophy loop weakens. WIL placements, where students encounter AI systems in real work contexts, are the most direct mechanism for building this capacity at scale. The infrastructure to do this already exists in Canada. It simply has not been directed at the problem.

3. Canada’s WIL Infrastructure: A Scalable but Untapped Mechanism

Canada’s Work-Integrated Learning ecosystem is among the most developed in the world. The scale is real. The Student Work Placement Program (SWPP), renewed in Budget 2025 with $635.2 million over three years (Government of Canada, 2025b), building on the $207.6 million allocated for 2025–26 (Government of Canada, 2025a), has created over 300,000 placements since 2017 with over 34,000 employers across 420 post-secondary institutions (Government of Canada, 2026a). CEWIL Canada, the national WIL association, recognizes nine types of WIL and operates an accreditation program covering over 50 member institutions (CEWIL Canada, 2021, CEWIL Canada, 2026b).

In a survey of postsecondary WIL practitioners, only 28% reported that their institution uses AI to support any WIL-related process (Peters & Shewan, 2024). No standalone AI literacy framework exists for WIL in Canada. The P.E.A.R. quality framework (McRae, Pretti, & Church, 2018), referenced by CEWIL Canada's Quality Council, governs the structural and pedagogical quality of WIL placements but does not address AI literacy or other technology-specific competencies.

The demand, however, is clear. CEWIL Canada’s AI WIL Month post-session survey (91 respondents across the national WIL ecosystem) found that 64% of practitioners identified building their own AI readiness as their top priority, 60% prioritized supporting ethical and responsible AI use, and 30% reported lack of practitioner confidence or training as their single biggest challenge (CEWIL Canada, 2026a). In open responses, practitioners called for national leadership on AI and named practitioner training as the most urgent unmet need in the WIL ecosystem. The demand exists within the system; what is missing is the federal resourcing to meet it.

Beyond SWPP, the federal government already funds innovative WIL delivery through the Innovative Work-Integrated Learning (I-WIL) initiative, which operates through seven national intermediaries including CEWIL Canada's iHUB (Government of Canada, 2026b). The iHUB alone represents $90 million in federal investment across 200+ post-secondary institutions

(CEWIL Canada, 2026c), and an independent economic impact assessment by the Conference Board of Canada (2026) confirmed measurable GDP contributions from iHUB-funded placements, including student remuneration effects, future earnings uplift, and operational multipliers. The I-WIL delivery model, federal funding flowing through specialized intermediaries to institutions, is precisely the mechanism through which AI literacy integration could scale without building new infrastructure. The infrastructure is not hypothetical. It is operational, federally funded, and reaching students at national scale. What it lacks is a mandate to address AI literacy.

A national pilot demonstrates practitioner demand. In 2026, CEWIL Canada's AI WIL Month, a curated learning series featuring speakers from UC Berkeley, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), and HUX AI, among others, drew 1,062 registrations and 800 attendees across 200+ post-secondary institutions (CEWIL Canada, 2026a). This demonstrated that WIL practitioners, employers, and institutional leaders will engage with AI literacy programming at scale when it is made available through existing WIL channels.

Other emerging models demonstrate that deeper integration is feasible. The University of Waterloo's Centre for Work-Integrated Learning received a $500,000 Embark grant (February 2026) to develop a 10-hour AI micro-course paired with WIL project integration (University of Waterloo, 2026). Mitacs has supported over 14,000 AI-specific internships with more than $200 million invested across over 117 academic institutions (Innovating Canada, 2024). Seneca Polytechnic partnered with Microsoft to integrate Azure AI into student learning tools, including an AI tutor and personalized job interview simulations (Microsoft Canada, 2024). Polytechnics Canada members operate Applied AI Research Centres across eight institutions (Polytechnics Canada, 2026) and delivered WIL to over 74,000 students in 2023–24 (Polytechnics Canada, 2025).

These initiatives are promising. They are also fragmented. No federal policy connects them, no common competency framework guides them, and no data collection mechanism measures AI literacy outcomes across WIL programs. The pieces exist. What is missing is the architecture to connect them.

4. International Benchmarking: Canada's Position

The international comparison is stark. Every peer nation is moving. Canada is not:

Jurisdiction	AI Literacy Obligation	Workforce Target	WIL-AI Integration
EU	Binding (AI Act Article 4, in force Feb 2025)	Employer obligation; in application since Feb 2025	Implied via employer training requirements
UK	Voluntary national programme	10M workers with AI skills by 2030	AI apprenticeship (Level 4, 18 months)
Singapore	Programme-driven; no statute	100,000 "AI Bilingual" workers within three years (by ~2029)	9-month AI Apprenticeship, (no fees; monthly training allowance)
Australia	No statutory mandate	1M free AI microcredentials	National AI Centre & TAFE NSW: 1M free AI microskills (2025). Adelaide University integrating AI across curricula institutionally.
Canada	None. AIDA died Jan 2025. No voluntary federal policy.	None comparable.	Waterloo pilot ($500K); Mitacs (14K AI internships). No federal coordination.

Sources: EUR-Lex (Regulation 2024/1689); GOV.UK AI Skills Boost; Skills England (2026); MDDI Singapore NAIIP (2026); AI Singapore AIAP (2025); Ministers for Industry, Science and Resources (Australia, 2025); Adelaide University (2024).

In Canada, with AIDA having died on the order paper in January 2025, organizations currently navigate AI governance through existing privacy laws, voluntary standards, and provincial initiatives, with no comprehensive federal framework in force or in development (MLT Aikins, 2026). The EU AI Act's Article 4 is particularly significant. It establishes AI literacy as a regulatory obligation for all AI providers and deployers, with extraterritorial application (EUR-Lex, Regulation 2024/1689). Canadian employers operating in EU markets must already comply. The AI literacy obligation under Article 4 has been in application since February 2025 (European Commission, 2024), meaning Canadian employers operating in EU markets must already comply. Canadian graduates completing SWPP placements in 2027 and beyond will enter a global labour market where AI literacy is already a regulatory expectation, not a personal advantage. A federal policy integrating AI literacy into WIL would align Canada's workforce development with this emerging international standard while preparing graduates for global employment.

5. Policy Recommendations

The following four recommendations are designed to be implementable now. They leverage existing federal policy mechanisms. None require new legislation. These recommendations can

be implemented within existing program envelopes and mechanisms, though some may require reallocation of resources within current funding streams.

Recommendation 1: Resource SWPP Delivery Partners to Integrate AI Literacy Learning Outcomes

The government could allocate a dedicated stream within the SWPP renewal to support delivery partners in developing and integrating AI literacy learning outcomes into funded placements, effective 2027–28, allowing one year for delivery partner capacity-building and learning outcome development, drawing on demonstrated national models such as the 2026 AI WIL Month learning series, which attracted over 1,000 registrations across 200+ post-secondary institutions. Learning outcomes could include: understanding AI capabilities and limitations relevant to the placement role; identifying ethical considerations in AI deployment within the host organization; or demonstrating critical evaluation of AI-generated outputs. The SWPP's existing delivery partner structure (organizations covering sector-specific domains) provides a ready-made mechanism for sector-tailored implementation. The I-WIL initiative already demonstrates that ESDC can fund specialized learning outcomes through intermediary organizations; extending this model to include AI literacy learning outcomes within SWPP placements could be achieved through delivery partner agreement modifications, though ESDC would need to determine whether the scope of change constitutes an operational adjustment or requires Treasury Board approval as a program modification. This recommendation operates within Budget 2025's $635.2 million renewal envelope and requires no additional appropriations, but may require reallocation of resources within current funding streams.

Recommendation 2: Establish a National WIL-AI Competency Framework Through the Standards Council of Canada[4]

The government could commission the Standards Council of Canada to convene national WIL associations, post-secondary institutions, employers, and AI governance organizations to develop a national competency framework for AI literacy in WIL contexts. CAN/DGSI 128:2025, Canada's first National Standard on Ethical AI, already requires AI literacy training for staff and students within research institutions (Clause 9.1), providing a precedent and foundation. As a member of the expert drafting teams for both CAN/DGSI 128 and a related standard CAN/DGSI 137, the author can confirm that these standards were designed with extensibility in mind; the AI literacy provisions in CAN/DGSI 128 can serve as the starting architecture for a WIL-specific competency framework. The UNESCO AI Competency Frameworks for Students (12 competencies) (2024a) and Teachers (15 competencies) (2024b) offer an adaptable international architecture. A standards commission of this scope could be completed for a fraction of what CAN/DGSI 128 required, given the existing foundational work.

[4] The author is employed by CEWIL Canada in a partnerships and communications role. This brief was developed independently, drawing on the author's AI governance coursework and national standards committee work. Readers should be aware of this institutional relationship when evaluating references to CEWIL Canada's programming and data. CEWIL Canada membership and accreditation figures cited in this brief (1,900+ members, 200+ institutions, 51 accredited institutions) reflect current organizational records as of April 2026 and may differ from earlier parliamentary submissions that reported membership at earlier points in time.

Recommendation 3: Embed AI Literacy in Labour Market Development Agreements and Workforce Development Agreements

The government could include AI literacy as a recognized priority area in federal–provincial/territorial LMDAs and WDAs, which collectively transfer approximately $3 billion annually to provinces and territories for skills training. Federal priority letters to provinces can signal AI literacy as a focus area without requiring renegotiation of bilateral agreements. This approach extends AI literacy integration beyond post-secondary WIL into the broader workforce development system, reaching workers already in the labour market.

Recommendation 4: Integrate AI Adoption Questions into SWPP Post-Placement Reporting

The government could integrate AI adoption questions into existing SWPP post-placement surveys, with dedicated analytical support through Statistics Canada, to build a national evidence base on how AI is changing the roles students are placed into, what AI tools students encounter during their placements, and whether students receive any AI-related training. SWPP delivery partners and national WIL associations would serve as subject matter experts in survey design, while Statistics Canada would provide the analytical infrastructure. Budget 2025's $25 million allocation for Statistics Canada's Artificial Intelligence and Technology Measurement Program (TechStat), designed to measure AI's impact on the labour force and economy (Government of Canada, 2025b), provides a natural complement; integrating SWPP post-placement data into TechStat's analytical infrastructure would generate WIL-specific insights at minimal additional cost. This creates the evidence base needed for future policy calibration without duplicating existing federal measurement efforts.

Summary of Recommendations

#	Recommendation	Mechanism	Timeline
1	Resource SWPP delivery partners to integrate AI literacy learning outcomes	ESDC delivery partner agreement modification	Effective 2027–28
2	Establish National WIL-AI Competency Framework through multi-stakeholder commission	Standards Council of Canada commission	Development 2026–27; adoption 2028
3	Embed AI literacy in LMDAs/WDAs	Federal priority letters to provinces/territories	Next bilateral renewal cycle
4	Integrate AI adoption questions into SWPP post-placement reporting	SWPP survey modification + Statistics Canada analytical support	Effective 2027–28

Conclusion

Canada's AI investment strategy has built world-class research infrastructure and compute capacity. What it has not built is a workforce that can evaluate, govern, and redirect the AI systems being deployed across every sector of the economy. That is the gap this brief addresses.

The $4.4 billion invested in AI since 2017 has produced a paradox: a country that leads in AI research but lags in preparing its own workers and graduates to operate in an AI-shaped economy. The intervention window is not indefinite. As AI systems embed in workplace processes, the skills required to question and redirect those systems atrophy. Each year without AI literacy integration into WIL programs is a year in which hundreds of thousands of students enter workplaces where they encounter AI systems with no structured preparation for critical engagement.

Canada possesses the infrastructure to act. The SWPP and the I-WIL initiative together represent over $725 million in active federal WIL investment, with delivery infrastructure spanning 420 institutions, seven national intermediaries, and tens of thousands of employers. National WIL associations provide standards and accreditation infrastructure (CEWIL Canada, 2026b). The Standards Council of Canada has a precedent in CAN/DGSI 128. None of the four recommendations in this brief require new legislation. They require only the policy decision to connect Canada's AI ambitions to Canada's workforce development infrastructure. Each recommendation aligns with the stated priorities of the renewed AI strategy: SWPP integration supports adoption, the competency framework builds trust, LMDAs extend scale, and post-placement reporting strengthens Canada's sovereign data capacity on AI workforce readiness.

The question is not whether Canada can afford to integrate AI literacy into WIL. The question is whether it can afford not to, while the EU mandates AI literacy for all employers, the UK trains 10 million workers, Singapore subsidizes AI apprenticeships, and Australia offers one million free AI microcredentials. **Among peer nations that have established dedicated AI literacy programs, including the EU, UK, Singapore, and Australia, Canada stands alone in having no federal framework. This brief offers one.**

About the Author

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Disclosure: The author is employed by CEWIL Canada (Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada), the national association for work-integrated learning in Canada, representing over 1,900 members across 200+ post-secondary institutions. This brief was developed independently, drawing on the author's AI governance training, national standards committee work, and practitioner expertise. CEWIL Canada data cited in this brief (AI WIL Month survey results, iHUB program figures, accreditation statistics) are publicly available organizational data. The policy recommendations do not represent CEWIL Canada's institutional position and were not developed at CEWIL Canada's direction.

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