Standing Committee on Science and Research Artificial Intelligence
Briefing Note:

Positioning Canada as a global leader in responsible AI

Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences
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Canada risks losing its competitive edge in artificial intelligence (AI) because we continue to underinvest in the human-centred expertise that makes AI trustworthy. As the Minister has already affirmed in his testimony to the SRSR on December 3rd, public trust is a prerequisite for adoption. Without it, innovation stalls and economic benefits go unrealized. Building upon a foundation of trust will secure the Canadian economy of the future. Canada needs humanities and social sciences (HSS) expertise to build this trust and, by extension, a sustainable and responsible AI ecosystem for all Canadians.

The Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences is a national non-profit organization that represents HSS institutional programs, scholarly associations, and scholars nationwide. Our consultations show that Canada has deep HSS expertise in AI that remains significantly underutilized. This expertise is critical for advancing public trust, strengthening labour-market adaptation, and shaping effective and equitable governance systems.

*Recommendation: To position Canada as a global leader in responsible and human-centred artificial intelligence, the Federation recommends that at least 30 percent of new federal investments in AI be dedicated to building societal trust through human-centred AI, including support for HSS researchers and talent.*

Canada's ambition to lead in AI must be matched by investments that reflect the full spectrum of expertise needed to shape it responsibly. To secure Canada's sustainable AI future, we must leverage human-centred approaches to AI, drawing on HSS expertise, and invest in its capacity to guide innovation, governance, and public trust.

## The problem: AI development without human-centred guardrails

Tech companies in the private sector have primarily driven the advancement of AI, with some in close contact with university-based researchers. This has produced rapid innovation, but with limited attention to the ethical, social, cultural, and environmental considerations that extend beyond business and computer science sectors, and that are essential to responsible use. This gap has serious consequences.

Recent research by the Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy shows how the unregulated use of facial recognition technologies in Canada has exposed major governance and equity gaps. These tools have been adopted through opaque procurement processes that undermine privacy, disproportionately harm racialized communities, and erode public trust.

A sustainable human-centred AI future requires a deliberate recentering of people and communities in technology development, an area where the HSS offer established and evidence-based expertise. The HSS advance human-centred approaches that engage the people and communities most directly impacted by the rise of AI, placing ethical and humanistic approaches to technology at the forefront of

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its development and adaptation. These insights are essential to ensuring that AI technologies serve the public interest and reflect Canadian values, thereby securing the future of Canadian sovereignty.

# The opportunity: Canada's underutilized HSS capacity

## Canada's HSS workforce: An underused national asset

According to recent Statistics Canada data, HSS programs accounted for over 50% of post-secondary enrollments in the 2021-2022 school year.  This represents one of Canada's largest domestic talent pipelines.

In these programs, students develop critical competencies such as adaptability, communication, and social skills that are becoming increasingly desirable in the tech world. Recent research from the Future Skills Centre affirms that Canada's AI workforce needs a stronger blend of technical and human-centred expertise.

However, current investment patterns disproportionately favour technical AI training and overlook how to integrate HSS human-centred expertise. Targeted investment in HSS-based AI education and applied research would mobilize this workforce, expand Canada's innovation capacity, and help ensure AI development supports productivity, competitiveness, and social well-being.

## HSS expertise: Essential for responsible AI ecosystems

HSS researchers already contribute to AI ecosystems through work on ethics, governance, regulation, public trust, labour impacts, education, and community-engaged innovation. Existing examples demonstrate the value of integrating HSS expertise into AI work:

- The AI + Society Initiative at the University of Ottawa unites scholars in law, ethics, and policy to analyze the societal implications of artificial intelligence.
- The Observatoire international sur les impacts sociétaux de l'IA et du numérique (OBVIA) at Université Laval brings together more than 250 researchers from the humanities, social sciences, and STEM to study the ethical, cultural, and labour impacts of AI.
- The Institute for Work & Health's "Partnership on AI and Quality of Work (PAIQ)" connects social scientists, labour experts, and policymakers to study how AI is transforming job quality and worker well-being.

These programs show what is possible. Sustained and scaled federal investment is required to meet growing national needs and to ensure Canada's AI ecosystem reflects rights-based, equitable, and socially attuned approaches.

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# Mechanisms to ensure the diffusion, valorization, and protection of Canadian AI & sovereignty

A responsible and competitive national AI ecosystem requires coordinated federal leadership that integrates human-centred expertise throughout research, development, and deployment. Federal action is crucial to:

- **Research capacity:** Expand funding streams for applied and interdisciplinary HSS-led AI research that examines ethics, governance, labour impacts, equity, and public trust. This work builds the evidence base needed to anticipate risks early and prevent costly system failures that erode public confidence.
- **Talent development:** Strengthen training across Canada's largest post-secondary student population, ensuring that future AI workers have both technical and human-centred competencies. This approach reflects growing labour-market expectations.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Facilitate collaboration between HSS scholars, STEM researchers, policymakers, communities, and industry. This strengthens the flow of research insights to decision makers, reducing the likelihood of preventable harms.
- **Governance and societal readiness:** Support HSS-led approaches that design and evaluate governance models, public engagement strategies, and accountability mechanisms across the AI lifecycle. This includes research on rights-based regulation, procurement standards, community participation, and impacts on democratic institutions. This work equips Canada with the societal infrastructure needed to adopt AI responsibly and sustain public confidence.

Federal leadership is also essential to ensure that Canadian AI discoveries are mobilized for public benefit. This includes supporting open, interdisciplinary knowledge-sharing pathways, responding to privacy and labour concerns, and protecting Canadian innovations in ways that balance economic opportunity with responsible use.

Canada now has an opportunity to lead globally in responsible and human-centred AI. Realizing this vision requires deliberate investment in the HSS, along with strengthened support for interdisciplinary collaborations that guide AI development in ways that benefit all Canadians.

A commitment to dedicating 30 percent of federal AI investments to building human-centred approaches through HSS research and talent would anchor this work and ensure Canada builds an AI ecosystem grounded in public trust and competitiveness.

The Federation and its community of HSS experts stand ready to work with the federal government to shape an AI future that reflects Canada's values, strengthens public trust in innovation, and secures Canadian sovereignty.