

# Turning the Tide for Innovation in Canada



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**T**wenty years ago, Canada was faced with a difficult question: “How can we elevate Canadian research to compete, even lead, on a global scale?”

Today, we are faced with an equally thorny and important question: “How can we elevate Canadian innovation to be competitive in the world?”

This country addressed the first problem well; to tackle the latter we should draw lessons from the vision and determination it took to set Canadian research on the right track.

In the 1990s, research in Canada was in trouble. Dilapidated labs prevented researchers from easily querying the cutting-edge questions that would let them lead their fields. Many of them left for other countries that offered more opportunity; it was a trend that had university presidents across this country worried. Canada had historically under-invested in research facilities and equipment and as a result research in Canada simply wasn't keeping up to the rest of the world.

Things changed. The creation of the Canada Foundation for Innovation by the Government of Canada in 1997 played a big part. It was a

moment in time when political and research leaders came together to turn the tide for Canadian research. Building world-class research facilities and stocking them with state-of-the-art equipment was itself an experiment – a way to encourage researchers to reach higher, think bigger – and it worked.

The results have been transformative. Today, Canadian campuses boast research facilities that are world-leading. Our campuses now attract global leaders and are magnets for esteemed research partnerships from Germany, France, the U.S., and many other research-intensive countries.

The CFI has gathered some 500 world-class labs on our Research Facilities Navigator, an online directory of facilities that have the expertise, state-of-the-art tools and willingness to work with businesses to help them compete. It's a testament to the fact that Canadian research is now well-positioned to help close the gap between ideas and innovation.

Still, 20 years later, most measures of innovation would suggest that, with all the ground we've gained in research in this country, there is still much to be done to make the leap from lab to marketplace.

It's not enough to have the best ideas, the best people, the best facilities, though this is what we've worked hard to build in recent decades. The time is ripe, in the midst of Canada's Fundamental Science Review and with a new innovation agenda, to ask where the specific gaps are in the innovation system and to find mechanisms to close them.

So what are the missing pieces that remain to propel innovation in Canada to where it ought to be?

In some sense, the answers are obvious. For example, we have a hard time in this country growing companies to be large enough to

be globally competitive, leaving our spin-offs and innovative start-ups vulnerable to being bought out. Our businesses have become the farm team for the big leagues of much larger, more competitive marketplaces.

One way to address challenges like these is to make smart, focused investments in areas of strength for Canada – supporting areas of research that position Canada as a global leader has always been a fundamental tenet of how the CFI operates. We see the wisdom of this approach in the clusters of expertise that have arisen across the country – from traditional areas like agricultural research that thrives at institutions like the University of Saskatchewan, to the concentration of high-tech enterprises in the Toronto-Waterloo corridor, to the burgeoning expertise in brain science centred around Montreal, to ocean research in Victoria, Halifax and St. John's.

These critical masses of expertise become the underpinnings of strong economies and hubs of innovation. More than that, they become the training grounds for the next generation of innovators and an incubator for their entrepreneurial spirit.

To continue to generate these successes, it is critical that all players work together to foster a culture of innovation in Canada. The same kind of bold, clear-eyed strategy that rectified a dismal outlook for our research community two decades ago is what will help Canada raise its grade for innovation today.

*Gilles Patry is President and CEO of the Canada Foundation for Innovation. Help celebrate the CFI's 20th anniversary, and learn more about its origins at [Innovation.ca](http://Innovation.ca)*