

Evaluation of the New Opportunities Fund

Key Findings

New Opportunities Fund: Where We Are

The Canada Foundation for Innovation is deeply committed to the principle of public accountability. That's why, in 2001, we asked Hickling Arthurs Low, the technology management, strategy and economics firm, to evaluate the New Opportunities Fund (NOF). We wanted to know, from an independent source, if the Fund was achieving its goals.

The Fund is designed to provide the tools - leading-edge equipment, laboratories and facilities - to researchers hired for their first full-time academic appointments in universities, so they can enhance the research capacity and enable the country to reap social and economic benefits from these investments.

As universities across Canada seek to replace retiring faculty, they confront increasing competition around the globe. We think the New Opportunities Fund gives Canada a competitive edge. The Fund provides institutions with the resources to retain existing faculty members and to attract outstanding researchers. This research infrastructure often tips the balance in luring talent to Canada, enhancing opportunities for training and increasing the research capacity and competitiveness of new appointees.

We were extremely pleased that Hickling Arthurs Low has documented the impacts of these investments. The New Opportunities Fund is a model program that meets its objectives, the firm concludes. We'd like to summarize a few of the key findings in this very positive report. The firm, which reported back in January 2002, did a document review, interviews, case studies and surveyed 729 researchers involved in 491 projects financed by CFI at 41 institutions.

Major Findings:

- The objectives of the New Opportunities Fund are reasonable and realistic. And the fund is meeting those objectives.
- The New Opportunities Fund has been a critical factor in attracting high-calibre researchers to universities. From the 2001 awards, 64 percent of new investigators named the Fund as one of the reasons they were attracted to the institution and/or Canada.
- More than 40 percent of the researchers awarded New Opportunities funding were hired from outside Canada.
- The Fund helped to bring 55 researchers back from the United States, where they had gone after earning their Ph.D. in Canada.
- The Fund has played an even more critical role in retaining outstanding researchers, reversing the "brain drain." From the 2001 awards, 89 percent said the fund was a factor in their decision to stay in Canada or at the Canadian institution.
- The state-of-the-art equipment and facilities the Fund has financed have advanced the careers of new investigators. A large majority - 89 percent - of investigators reported the investment has increased the quality and productivity of their research.

- For two-thirds of researchers, the new infrastructure is a major factor in attracting more high quality graduate students and providing them with better training. An overriding majority of researchers (94%) believe that it has improved the career prospects of their graduate students.
- 90% of researchers consider the quality of their infrastructure to be above average compared to similar infrastructure in Canada and elsewhere in the world.

Where We Go From Here

This study confirms that Canada's innovation capacity is strengthening steadily. Some future considerations were noted:

- The New Opportunities Fund has increased pressure on the granting councils to finance research. The Fund has also increased the quality of applications to the councils.
- Institutions applauded the Fund's program design and cost-sharing arrangements, but worried about their ability to continue to obtain matching funds from the provinces, private sector and internal sources.
- The study concludes that continuing investment is required, particularly as the number of retiring faculty will put more pressure on post-secondary institutions to hire.
- If the New Opportunities Fund were better integrated with support programs from the federal granting councils, it would be easier for Canadian institutions to offer more competitive start-up programs to attract outstanding researchers.
- Administrative processes at institutions need to improve so that it doesn't take as long to implement New Opportunities Fund projects.

Significant Quotes from the Report:

“The NOF has strengthened the ability of universities to attract and retain promising researchers and provide enhanced research training through the availability of state-of-the-art equipment.”

“A frequent comment we heard, further demonstrated by the survey results, was that **the NOF has improved the attractiveness of a research career in Canada.**”

“The evidence presented in this report shows that **the NOF has changed the research culture at universities** and enabled new faculty to move towards their full research potential.”

“High quality students are being attracted into pursuing their postgraduate degrees in Canada as opposed to going to the U.S.”

“**Innovation capacity in this country is being improved** through the higher quality of research training resulting from the NOF investments and the number of linkages being formed by researchers with the private sector, other institutions and government research.”

- New Opportunities Fund Evaluation, Hickling Arthurs Low, January 15, 2002 (Emphasis added by CFI).