

# Commentary

by Maureen O'Neil



## WE MAY NEED A NEW DEFINITION OF "RESEARCH EXCELLENCE"<sup>1</sup>

The Canadian research environment is undergoing remarkable change. Recovering from the rigours of deficit cutting, increased federal funding gives life to the government's pledge in last year's Speech from the Throne to pursue a global strategy for Canadian science and technology, advancing Canada from 15th to fifth place in the international R&D league table.

This renaissance for research in Canada comes at a time when, according to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, nearly 80 percent of Canadian universities have, or are en route to having, a strategic plan for internationalization. The International Development Research Centre, meanwhile, continues to advocate that Canada's research conducted with other countries include researchers and institutions in the developing regions of the world. These researchers and their institutions are supported by the IDRC, a public corporation based in Ottawa, in their efforts to help developing countries find long-term solutions to the social, economic, and environmental problems they face.

• [en français](#)

Canadian universities should use a portion of the new funds made available to them to include research for development as part of their core research, teaching and community outreach. This will help ensure that the benefits of science reach everyone, creating a more just and secure world.

IDRC applauds changes in the rules for several grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research that permit foreigners to receive Canadian funds because this opens the possibility of North-South research collaborations that do not fall into the philanthropic frame of international development assistance but into the mainstream of research collaboration.

The councils' policy change will also give Canadians more access to critical off-shore data and brain power. However, there is a risk in doing so. The councils stress "research excellence" as an accountability measure. Do we have an unchallenged measure of research excellence? Many people in the research community feel that research conducted with developing country counterparts may compromise such standards. As research managers ourselves, we at IDRC understand the emphasis on excellence but suggest that this measure be tempered in the light of the real world. Hedging and risk-averse approaches must not trap Canadian researchers within one definition of research excellence, blinding them to other less familiar approaches to knowledge creation and capacity building

ARCHIV  
ONEIL  
no. 117633

while blunting the potential to create exciting new knowledge.

The councils also emphasize “innovation”, and this offers real scope for Canada to lead in international research. Innovation seeks to do what has not been previously tried. “Research excellence”, however, is measured against past performance, making the two measures incompatible and leaving researchers wondering how best to proceed.

Now is the time to consider how we define “excellence” and “innovation” and how we will measure research results against them. By “excellence”, we may mean “urgently needed and challenging research” – that which is problem oriented, multi-disciplinary (preferably comparative) and carried out by teams networking internationally across research sites and policy jurisdictions. By “innovative”, we may value co-production of knowledge through innovations only made possible by bringing together the experience of experts in Canada and other countries and applying that knowledge to solve real problems.

The new research environment in Canada offers the opportunity to consider research for development, not as charity, but as essential to the creation of critical knowledge to benefit Canadians and those struggling with economic, health and environmental impediments to development.

How “excellence” is rewarded by universities is another question. Too often IDRC hears stories, especially from younger faculty, that they get little or no credit towards career promotion and tenure for the research they do on IDRC and CIDA-funded projects. This is considered “research for development” or research that is worthy but not “excellent”. This is an unfortunate distinction and one that IDRC believes would be proven false if viewed in the context of the renewed research environment in Canada and given our country’s goal of contributing to and benefiting from international R&D.

As Canadian universities seek to renew faculty in the next 10 years, this is a remarkable juncture to internationalize teaching, research and service. What is required is leadership from the highest levels of universities in support of researchers’ collaboration with developing country counterparts. Granting councils will also need to continue the trend of supporting foreign researchers in Canadian collaboration and to encourage peer reviewers to accept the added risk of supporting North-South collaboration when innovative, challenging and urgently needed research is proposed.

Maureen O’Neil is President of the International Development Research Centre.

This commentary was published in the April 2002 issue of *University Affairs of the Association of University and Colleges of Canada*

[top](#)

---

Last updated 2002-04-24

Copyright 2001 International Development Research Centre  
More information about this site