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Sometimes Canada gets it right

In a country where jurisdictional wrangling often impedes progress, the Knowledge Infrastructure Program stands out as an example of three levels of governments working together for the benefit of all Canadians.

By [STEPHEN J. TOOPE](#), [DAVID NAYLOR](#) | Jan. 30, 2012

The fall of 2008 was not a happy time in Canada. Canada was slipping into a global recession, a just-retired third minority Parliament was cranky and Canadians were increasingly cynical about the capacity of government to respond to real and urgent needs. These were not what would normally be called winning conditions for public policy success.

In the fall of 2011, things are better but sunny days have not returned. The economic future remains cloudy.

Perhaps, then, it's worth taking a time-out from the gloom to celebrate something that governments and the private sector got right.

The federal government announced the Knowledge Infrastructure Program as part of the 2009 stimulus budget. What began as a direct investment of \$1.3-billion from the federal government was leveraged—with funding from the provinces, municipalities and the private sector—into an investment of \$3.2-billion to upgrade and renew research and learning facilities on university campuses across the country. These investments are having an impact today, and will help shape the future of higher education, research, and innovation in Canada for years to come.

Equipped with these resources Canadian universities set about upgrading, expanding, or building new state-of-the-art labs, libraries and learning spaces. In some cases, the projects addressed the pressing need for increased student capacity.

At the University of Toronto's Mississauga campus, the new Instruction Centre includes a full range of technology-enabled classrooms varying in size from 30 seats to a 500-seat auditorium, dedicated study space and a 24/7 computer lab. Others made dramatic contributions to sustainability.

At the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus, the new GeoExchange system uses groundwater from under the campus to heat and cool buildings, making the campus almost emissions-free.

Several aspects of the Knowledge Infrastructure Program were unusual. The first was its speed. The program went from initial discussions to announcement in just six weeks. And the program moved from announcement to project funding decisions in just six months. A total of 183 projects on 79 campuses were approved.

Universities, not always known for rapid decision-making, committed to completing the projects in two years. Some kitchen renovations take longer!

As well, in a country where jurisdictional wrangling often impedes progress, the Knowledge Infrastructure Program stands out as an example of three levels of governments working together for the benefit of all Canadians.

The responsibility for delivering the Knowledge Infrastructure Program fell to Industry Canada—not typically a program delivery department. Yet a team was assembled that reviewed proposals, hammered out a deal with each province and monitored progress. Virtually all of the projects were completed on time and on budget.

Such alignment and speed of action across three levels of government, the private sector, and universities across the entire country is unprecedented.

Obviously, the private sector players saw in the program relief from what could have been a massive slowdown in the building industry. Yes, the provinces and federal government were compelled to act to stimulate the economy and to play nicely with each other, and municipalities stepped up to the plate to do their part.

Granted, too, that universities had a back-log of capital needs.

But what strikes us was the spirit of partnership and collaboration shown by all involved in delivering the Knowledge Infrastructure Program. It animated staff at Canada's universities, hundreds of contractors and thousands of construction workers, individual and corporate donors, and all levels of government. It also built important facilities that will benefit hundreds of thousands of future students.

In November 2011, Canadian universities hosted public events to showcase all these new labs, libraries and learning spaces. Roughly 10,000 people attended, and we suspect many were families and friends of our own staff. No surprise there: these facilities aren't exactly tourist attractions. But as two university presidents from opposite sides of the country, we thought it still might be useful to send out a few public bouquets. Some things do get done surprisingly well in this sometimes frustrating country and these frustrating times. And as two citizens, we are also left wondering how, without a crisis like that of 2008 or the inspiration of an Olympic Games, Canadians might regularly rekindle the social solidarity and collaborative culture that drove forward the Knowledge Infrastructure Program.

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