

AusBiotech submission to the 'Review of the Science, Innovation and Technology advisory bodies of the Western Australian government'

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Introduction

AusBiotech is Australia's only national biotechnology organisation and represents more than 3,000 members covering the human health, agricultural, medical devices, environmental and industrial sectors in biotechnology. AusBiotech is dedicated to the development, expansion and prosperity of the Australian biotechnology industry by providing initiatives to drive sustainability and growth, outreach and access to markets, and representation and support for members nationally and around the world.

Biotechnology is a key industry of the future – driving economic growth and prosperity – and working on solutions to confronting global issues in health, climate change, food and fuel supply.

AusBiotech welcomes the opportunity to contribute comment to the '*Review of the Science, Innovation and Technology advisory bodies of the Western Australian government*'.

Since the initiation of advisory bodies in Western Australia more than two decades ago, there has been significant development of biotechnology toward a world-class industry, particularly in terms of healthcare, medical devices and agriculture. In the context of the current economic downturn and the subsequent reduction of access to capital funding - which is needed for R & D to commercialise discoveries and developments – it's more important than ever that public policy be supportive.

To that end, AusBiotech's would like to take this opportunity to make the following observations:

1. The line of access between the Life Sciences Unit of the Department of Commerce and the Minister (and the therefore Cabinet) appears to be indirect thus limiting its effectiveness, especially with response times to various initiatives coming from the unit, in terms of funding support. More direct access and engagement could be established through formal lines of direct communication with the Chief Scientist and/or the Technology Industry Advisory Council (TIAC). A series of working groups under the guidance of the Department would also aid access and therefore increase the potential outcomes for the biotechnology industry and the state economy.

2. AusBiotech suggests it could play a valuable role on the TIAC as a legitimate, relevant and experienced representative of the biotechnology industry in WA. AusBiotech currently supports an Industry Development Officer based in WA, who can be used as an industry resource. In addition AusBiotech has two WA-based directors on its Board.
3. The role of the Chief Scientist could be developed to include a more integrated role in the industry development strategy for WA, which could support a more aggressive global outreach program to secure investment capital for WA.
4. AusBiotech works collaboratively with state and federal departments. This coordination capability can be exploited by WA to ensure that it's aware of and, when useful, involved in national activities.

For the purposes of clarity, AusBiotech had framed its comments (below) in line with the Review's terms of reference.

Terms of reference

1. Review the terms of reference, current functions, achievements and limitations of both the Western Australian Science and Innovation Council and the Technology Industry and Advisory Committee.

Following the TIAC's production of its biotechnology report in 2000 (*"Biotechnology West: Strengths, Weaknesses and Opportunities"*) and the resulting WA Biotechnology Strategy (2006-2010), it was disappointing that funding ceased after one year of the implementation process. Further, AusBiotech believes, given its charter and body of knowledge, it could make a significant contribution to the Council, but is not represented at present. AusBiotech represents more than 100 members in Western Australia and in addition can bring a national view of biotechnology to the 'table'. Importantly, it takes an active local coordinating role for the industry, in terms of national initiatives, supported by two WA Board directors and a locally-based Industry Development Officer.

AusBiotech recommendation:

- To reinstate funding to complete the implementation phase of the WA Biotechnology Strategy (2006-2010), based on an adjusted time period and strategy review, together with an urgency that reflects the current economic climate.
- The WA Government to commence development of a follow-on Biotechnology Strategy (2010 – 2015), building on the State and national developments and encompass a bi-partisan long term approach, which supports investment funds into WA.
- TIAC to include an AusBiotech representative.

2. Review the current functions, achievements and limitations of the role of the Chief Scientist.

The role of the Chief Scientist is pivotal as a conduit between the Government's advisory groups and key decision makers within Government. It has provided strong support for R&D and education, and a lesser focus on crucial industry development. Concern has been raised that the role appears to be largely symbolic. There is a critical industry need for the Chief Scientist to articulate a clear long-term vision for the State, both to the industry and to political leaders, through more effective access to decision-making and funding.

AusBiotech recommendation:

- The Chief Scientist be provided with a modest budget to instigate programs and conduct reviews of the State's science and innovation capabilities and outcomes.
- A line of responsibility be established that enables a flow of communication between the advisory groups and Government.

3. Review the arrangements for all scientific support, including the current separately administered and funded Scitech, Centres of Excellence and strategic science and innovation fund, and technology industry assistance and provide recommendations for funding model options.

State leadership in science, technology and innovation is needed. Currently, the activities supported appear to operate in a fragmented way with a lack of strategic direction or clear set of industry priorities and performance metrics.

At a time of retracting resources-industry activity, targeted investment into the science, technology and innovation industries - such as biotechnology and information technology – is vital. There is potential to unlock opportunities to capture the State's intellectual capital in these areas.

AusBiotech recommendation:

- Government to take a leadership unifying position across the innovative industries;
 - Support for centres of public-sector research and development to continue with translational and industrial developments enhanced considerably;
 - Funding models supporting manufacturing and exporting to be considered a priority.
 - Links to the region and to and national programs should be enhanced.
4. Provide recommendations to rationalise current arrangements, including the possible consolidation of both external Council advice and internal administration.

The Biotechnology Unit (now Life Sciences), responsible for implementing the Biotechnology Strategy, is 'buried' inside the Department of Commerce at a non-executive level, with limited capacity to implement the necessary activity required to implement strategy.

The internal administration in the Department should be responsible for providing secretariat support to the Council and external working groups. Their subsequent role is to implement and monitor the programs established. Council should be the key advisory group.

AusBiotech recommendation:

Industry, through the industry body, should work with Government to form specific working groups to review key areas and develop policy and program proposals.

5. Provide recommendations about governance, including legislative basis, constitution and terms of reference, and functions of a future Council(s).

Governance of the Western Australian Science and Innovation Council (WASIC) should be captured in legislation (with sufficient flexibility) and consist of external private members, representative external members and leaders of government agencies (including Scitech). This Council would be most effective if it were required to present to Cabinet (via the Minister) with the deliberations of its working groups. These working groups would draw on expertise from outside the Council to gather a balanced view.

AusBiotech recommendation:

- Given that biotechnology crosses several portfolios, a mechanism of briefing the Ministers and members of Cabinet needs to be adopted. A central body can assist in a 'whole of government' approach and with cross portfolio coordination. State Government cabinet ministers should attend WASIC meetings on a regular basis to receive reports on STI recommendations and take ownership of recommendations;
- Membership of WASIC be constituted with individual, representative and government leaders.

6. Provide recommendations as to the composition of a future Council(s).

The current composition of the WASIC includes an excellent mix of expertise. However, as mentioned above (in Term 1), AusBiotech believes it has a significant contribution to make and would welcome the opportunity to sit on the Council.

AusBiotech recommendation:

- WASIC to include an AusBiotech representative;
- AusBiotech considers the State Government's Ministerial Cabinet should receive all outcomes of WASIC deliberations through regular direct reporting.

7. Provide recommendations as to the role and value of a Chief Scientist in relation to a future Council(s).

Refer to Term 2

AusBiotech recommendation:

Refer to Term 2

8. Confirm areas of strategic importance for direct Western Australian investment in science and innovation, as well as infrastructure and capability development.

Health and medical research is well funded in WA, however there needs to be a greater focus on, industrial, environmental, agricultural and marine biotechnology, engaging Asia and driving manufacturing and export. These less developed segments of the biotechnology industry have the potential to become national centres of excellence through more effective engagement with WA's natural trade partners in the resource industries.

AusBiotech recommendation:

There should be a greater focus on:

- Industrial, environmental, agricultural and marine biotechnology;
- Engaging Asia and attracting investment into the sector (utilising the known resource sector investment community); and
- Support manufacture and export of medical devices, healthcare and biotechnology through domestic enterprises.

AusBiotech would be willing to work with Government to exploit and further develop these areas.

9. The Department of Commerce's Science and Innovation Division will also be included in this review. Specifically the Minister has requested advice on the current limitations, abilities and the structure required to service recommendations contained in the final report.

The Life Sciences Unit appears to need more direct access and engagement with the Minister, possibly through the Chief Scientist or TIAC.

TIAC appears to have limited access to the Minister and is separate from the Department.

AusBiotech recommendation:

Form a series of working groups under the Department's guidance, similar to the model recently developed by DIIRD in Victoria:

- Investment
- Infrastructure
- Skills
- Bioeconomy

(AusBiotech has the expertise and experience to act as secretariat for such a program and is currently working with the Victorian Government in this capacity. The aim is to ensure the ownership of strategic direction and assist with advice on specific projects by industry.)

Summary

While the biotechnology industry has received the WA Government's valued attention and support through the advisory-body system, there is evidence of opportunities for improvement and growth. This is especially so in the current economic climate, which has heightened the need for effective support mechanisms led by governments.

In AusBiotech's view, the key opportunities for improvement are in the ability to establish a more effective line-of-access between the Department and the Minister. The Chief Scientist is thought to hold a pivotal role in this.

Regardless of the outcome of the review, AusBiotech wishes to be included on the Council, as a legitimate, relevant and experienced representative of the biotechnology industry in WA.

Despite the industry's continued promise, fragmentation in the State and the need for coherent linkages remains an issue. AusBiotech suggests that its recommendations, coupled with continued commitment from the Government will support the future growth of the biotechnology industry in Western Australia, which is so necessary for economic development.