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A Submission to the Joint Standing Committee of the National Capital and External Territories/National Institutions.

Questacon - The National Science and Technology Centre.

As founding director of Questacon, I am delighted to have this opportunity to record its achievements over the past 30 years and to highlight outstanding concerns in terms of the guidelines set out in the Joint Standing Committee's call for comments.

In 1988 the vision for Questacon was clearly articulated in Cabinet Submission 6143, Decision 1246. In this document the aims and objectives included stimulating public awareness and interest in science and technology throughout Australia; providing an educational facility to illustrate the cultural role of science in Australia; providing access to Questacon's resources outside the capital cities; demonstrating Australia's contribution to science and technology; and acting as a leader in science communication in the region. In addition, Questacon was required to seek funding and conduct commercial activities to support these goals. Under the terms of reference of this committee I therefore make the following comments about how Questacon is maintaining viability and relevance.

1. CREATING A STRONG BRAND AND ON-LINE PRESENCE

Questacon is well known throughout Australia and is seen as a world leader in science communication to the public. The name Questacon is synonymous with exemplary practice in science communication, leadership, public trust and with generating excitement in science in virtually every town and village throughout the land. Its web page has been acclaimed for its clarity and enlightenment. Questacon continues to promote the brand through international leadership and a strong national presence.

2. EXPERIMENTING WITH NEW FORMS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

Questacon consistently experiments with new forms of public engagement, for example the Ian Potter Centre has been established in recent years and is attracting new audiences. Questacon changes its exhibitions regularly and has included special evenings to attract hard to reach audiences, such as young adults. It also has a high involvement in new media. Questacon is unique in its ability to attract audiences of all ages and is continually experimenting with innovative methods.

3. CONDUCTING OUTREACH OUTSIDE CANBERRA

Questacon has a range of outreach programs including outreach to indigenous communities. Its Science Circus is a travelling science exhibition which is the most far reaching travelling science project in the world. Although the Science Circus began 30 years ago it has expanded its reach to virtually every small town and village in the country. In collaboration with the ANU it provides science graduates training in science communication towards a Masters degree. Uniquely, the graduates of this program contribute to the communication of science not only in Australia, but internationally. This includes participation in government. The circus methods have been copied by science centres in other parts of the world. For example Brazilian science centres report that they have many such circuses that have been modelled on what has been developed in Canberra. China has over one thousand such travelling exhibitions. Of course the circus is *only one part* of Questacon's national outreach and this is unequalled by any other cultural institution in Canberra.

4. CULTIVATING PRIVATE SECTOR SUPPORT

Questacon has a large measure of private sector support, for example the Science Circus has received major financial support from Shell Australia over a record period of 30 years. This multi award winning partnership is the longest lived sponsorship deal in Australian history. Many other private sector partners have chosen Questacon for all the reasons stated above. Nevertheless, obtaining such support is not easy, (see Items 5 and 6) and it is to Questacon's credit that it has achieved so much.

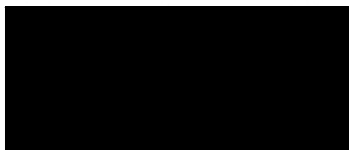
5. DEVELOPING OTHER INCOME STREAMS

From the outset Questacon has been required to raise a significant proportion of its annual operating costs. It is the only national cultural institution that charges families an entrance fee. Families are the very group that it is most important to attract to encourage the participation of young people in science. I undertook a study early in the history of the organisation which indicated that a 60:40 ratio of government to earned income was optimal. From 1988 funds have been raised through a general admission charge, through shop sales and through exhibition hire. Sponsorship for activities, such as that from Shell in respect of the Shell Questacon Science Circus, was usually insufficient to meet the full programme costs but nevertheless enabled Questacon to meet a national mission. The Government rhetoric of support for science and science education is not born out by adequate financial support for Questacon. This is not the case for many science centres in other countries in our region, and not the case for other national institutions.

6. ENSURING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

When Questacon became the National Science and Technology Centre in 1988 the Government made a very clear decision that it be established as a Statutory Corporation to maximise the opportunities to raise funds to support operations. Draft legislation was prepared in 1991 but the National Science and Technology Bill was never enacted. During my tenure as the Founding Director, the issue of governance exercised Council for quite a while. The expectation that the National Science and Technology Centre would become a statutory body determined how it operated in the first decade. For example, audited Annual Reports were prepared for the years 1988-9 to 2000-2001. The established Questacon name remained as a recognised brand and from 2001-2002, the annual reports of Questacon-the National Science and Technology Centre, appeared within Departmental Annual Reports reducing visibility. This became somewhat problematic when approaching sponsors who understandably wished to see annual accounts and who did not wish to contribute to Departmental operating costs. A major regret when I retired was that this issue of governance had not been satisfactorily addressed. A more recent review once again recommended that it should be a statutory authority. It is my firm opinion that there are strong benefits from having a legislated mandate and statutory authority status. Questacon, MUST be treated in the same manner as the other national cultural institutions.

In conclusion I am concerned that Questacon, despite its unique achievements and its outstanding performance within the terms of reference of this Committee, is still treated differently from the other institutions that the Committee is considering. I would be happy to testify to the Committee in person should this be deemed appropriate.



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