

Australia needs a strategy

Australians are constantly told that our economy is “in transition.” We need to move up the global value chain, build knowledge-based industries, prepare for the Asian Century, and be the “food bowl of the world.” These are grand ambitions that we share with many other nations, in our region and beyond. The question for all of us is: How?

I am not one of those who think that good things will happen just because we expect them to, in Australia or anywhere else. I think we need to organize, evaluate, and cohere; to make sure that we align our efforts and investments with our national interests, focus on areas that are of particular importance or where there is a particular need, and build to a scale that will make a difference both to ourselves and to a changing world. It is the knowledge that science will offer, and the sensible application of that knowledge to agreed-on goals, that will build stronger national economies and societies.

As Australia’s Chief Scientist, my role is to advise the federal government on matters of science policy and advocate a better understanding of science in industry and the community. Like the rest of Australia’s scientific community, I was disappointed by cuts in our recent federal budget. My real concern, however, is the lack of a strategy that would help us maximize the value of the science resources we do have.

This is not a new problem. It is one that has been allowed to persist for decades. Our support for science is the victim of short-term, on-again, off-again, thinking, terminating programs rather than giving them sustained support. We seem reluctant to identify na-

tional priorities and make sure we fund them appropriately—areas where we have the advantage, or need, or capacity to grow to scale or to take new products to the global market. This puts us at odds with an emerging global consensus.

This week, science advisory delegations from around the world convene in Auckland, New Zealand, to discuss the importance and challenges of providing policy-relevant science advice to governments. Policy-makers

globally have recognized the obvious point: Science isn’t like a toothbrush. You can’t buy it when you get there if you forgot to pack one. To build both capacity and capability, we need strategic investment supported by good planning and long-term commitment.

It troubles me that Australia remains the only country among the members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) without a science or technology strategy. The consequences are and will be felt in our performance, in a world more reliant than ever before on science and science-trained people.

We often claim to “punch above our weight,” but in reality our research effort could and ought to be better.

School participation in science and mathematics, particularly at senior levels, has fallen, when the trend should be heading the other way. The level of collaboration between our researchers and our businesses is one of the poorest in the OECD.

If we are serious in our wish for a fair and prosperous Australia, in a better and happier world, then we will look to science to sustain us. And we will need to be strategic. We will get the future we earn.

– Ian Chubb



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Science

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