

Questacon in Canberra: the case for expansion

The National Science and Technology Centre, better known as Questacon, is a national institution with a huge presence across Australia but best known for its Canberra centre. The centre was built in 1988 and has had over 350,000 visitors in its first year.

The natural capacity of the current building, even with the best management, is around 400,000 visitors a year. This level was achieved in about 2005. The building and staff has been working at over capacity for over a decade.

Questacon is the only Federal institution in Canberra that charges commercial rates for all general admission. It can therefore achieve significant own revenue which ranges at around 45%. This makes Questacon a very customer oriented and efficient organisation. Other Federal institutions struggle to reach 5% own revenue.

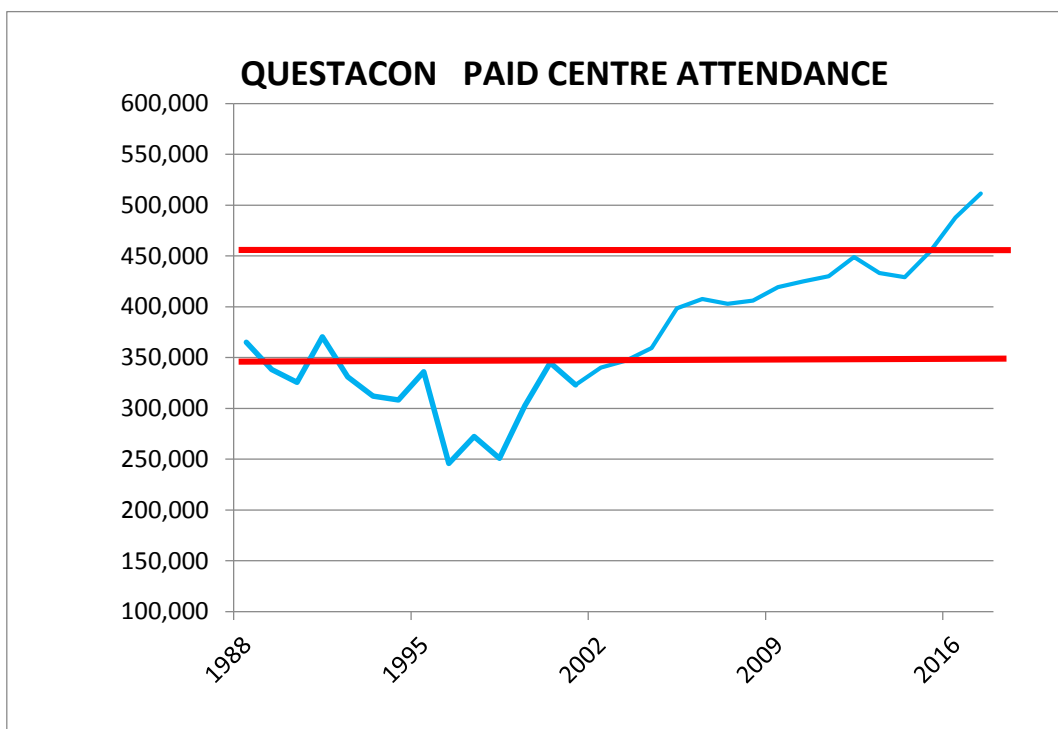
The Canberra Questacon centre needs to be expanded. The site would enable, and is planned for, a doubling of the current exhibition space.

It is now time to consider an expansion of the Canberra Questacon centre and in particular to re-examine a PPP proposal as a potential model.

Australia and Canberra needs a Federal Natural History Museum which incorporates all of the current federal natural history collections and this would be a logical fit to an expanded Questacon.

Discussion

Since its opening in 1988 as part of Australia’s bicentennial celebrations the National Science and Technology Centre(NSTC), better known as Questacon, has made a significant contribution to the life of the nation, the advancement of science understanding and the economy of the ACT. It has contacted over 30 million people since its doors were opened. Given its popularity and targeted marketing there is hardly an Australian child of school age in the last three decades who has not visited the centre in Canberra. The extensive range of Outreach programs means that this reach to Australian school children is almost 100%.



The table above shows the annual visitor numbers for the Canberra centre of Questacon. In the majority of its 30 years visitor numbers have ranged between 350,000 and 450,000. The honey moon period in 1988 was short-lived and the first decade were years spent establishing the organisation. New management in 1996 and a new focus on popular exhibitions started a rapid increase in popularity of the centre. A strong focus was placed on visiting school excursion groups and popular exhibitions. In the past two years block buster exhibitions, Space and Spiders, have boosted attendance to 500,000 however that should not be expected to be a sustainable level. The natural capacity of the current building, even with the best ongoing management, is around 400,000 visitors a year. The building and staff have been working at over capacity for over a decade.

2003 Expansion plans

In 2001-2, as Deputy Director Programs, I was responsible for a planning an expansion of the Canberra centre. These plans were extensively canvassed with Department of Finance however they never reached a cabinet proposal level.

The model chosen was a PPP expansion of the building which included an IMAX theatre, commercial concession spaces and a large underground carpark. The IMAX theatre was to have the ability for operation as a public theatre, particularly at night. The theatre was to have been available to other institutions.

The proposal did not proceed because of, amongst other reasons, the presence of free parking in the parliamentary triangle. This meant that a major car park concession could not be made viable. This has changed today and a multilevel underground car park could be potentially very financially viable and provide an important service to all institutions in the lower triangle. The commercial ownership of the car park could contribute significantly to the cost of new exhibition construction.

Any new proposal that looked at theatre today might well look a range of other projection hall systems that could be even more exciting than a simple IMAX.

I am unaware of any other expansion plans since 2006 although I am sure they would have happened.

Natural History Museum

Questacon is not a collecting organisation. However the Federal Government owns and manages several large natural history collections. Australian National Wildlife Collection in Canberra, the Australian National Insect Collection in Canberra and other collections including fish collections in Hobart and others. There is a good argument to locate all or most of these collections and the research staff in one central purpose built centre.

The National Science and Technology Centre could be expanded and also become Australia's Natural History Museum.

Governance

As part of any plan to expand Questacon and to incorporate other Commonwealth collections on the site, the governance of the NSTC should be reviewed. In the early 2000's the NSTC management was changed from a quasi-statutory organisation to a Departmental one. This has seriously constrained the operations of the organisation. I am aware that discussion concerning the governance of Questacon have been raised by many previous reviews and many recommend a move away from a Departmental structure.

Summary

Questacon is already Australia famous.

Questacon is already internationally highly regarded.

“An expanded independent Questacon with Australia’s foremost natural history collections at its heart, in a new state of the art 21st Century centre, would place Questacon in the iconic world class.”